

Lowriders: Cruising the Color Line

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the use of color in lowrider car customizations. It studies the relationships among car owners, car painters, and car clubs in the process of selection, and manipulation of color. This research studies how color is constructed as an element for individual and community differentiation. Also included is the examination of the influence of car clubs in the design process, the understanding of color by car painters and car owners, and the cultural values associated with color in this community. This research argues that through the use, manipulation, and implementation of color as a visual/design element, lowriders challenge, transgress, and resist the preconceived notions of space, aesthetic hegemony, and social disparity they experience. In this case, color as a cultural expression, becomes a pivotal element to narrate and retell their stories of struggle and endurance, as well as to envision a different world. This research frames Chicana/o vernacular production, and color use as being central to the borderland experience of this community. Finally, this research follows the discourse of taste, as this concept has been used to create social categories of exotic otherness and the perpetuation of specific aesthetic epistemologies. In this context, it presents lowriders as expression of a Chicana/o network of vernacular border knowledge. This dissertation concludes by framing the Low n' Slow movement, in the context of healing and emancipating practices enacted by subjugated communities in order to survive, give sense to their reality, and to envision a more egalitarian world.

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## **Chapter I**

### **INTRODUCTION - "STARTING THE CAR"**

#### **PREFACE**

It is widely accepted in design theory that color has agency; color affects people's behavior, the perception of objects, as well as the user's overall experience and satisfaction. Further, it is accepted that different cultural groups and societies relate to color differently. The United States represents a valuable space of heterogeneity in which a plethora of cultures coexists simultaneously. In this environment, the issue of color preferences and differences constitutes a fundamentally important area of exploration for designers who wish to pursue interest in understanding people and how they relate to objects.

Within the realm of design, color stands as more than just a marketing tool. Rather, it is viewed as intrinsic to the object itself. In this context, color as an agent of transformation should not be assumed only as desirable but also as contested and refused. As an inherently complex notion, color transcends basic visual aesthetics and is embedded with social behaviors, values, and practices. In the United States, for example, a woman wearing a white dress for her wedding is an expression of an enduring western cultural tradition. Any variation on bridal dress color implies clear transgressions to social norms and can imply variant meanings. The color of the dress invests an extra level of significance to the ceremony and the individual. This ritual value surrounding color is present in most cultures. In the West, even God is

perceived as having a color. In the Christian tradition, for example, emerald green is associated with Christ, blue with the Virgin Mary, and Evil tends to be black or red.

In addition to cultural norms involving the use and meaning of certain colors, there are psychological studies that result in ascribing different colors for separate states of mind or diseases. Further, in Eastern religious traditions, the Chakra system has created connections between color and a body's energy centers. The Mayan culture developed a complex color cosmology connecting the real and the spiritual chromatically. Color relationships have translated into music and dance. Today, some researchers even use color as indicators to distinguish different historical periods, while others have focused on the effects of color on types of life such as plants.

Our connections to color are not limited to chromatic relationships, for the contrary color is also linked to notions of taste, aesthetic right, or wrong, as well as to notions of civilized and primitive. As we will explore in this research, our epistemological understandings on color will affect how Chicana/o cultural productions, as lowriders, are interpreted, judged, and analyzed.

Before we can move forward, it is crucial to set the grounds around our object of study, lowriders. According to Charles Tatum (2001), lowrider cars are "typically decorated with multicolor paint jobs, crushed velvet interiors, hydraulic suspension systems, chain steering wheels, and other features that are dependent on the owner's ingenuity and ability to make a

considerable investment in [their] car” (p. 172). For Michael Cutler Stone (1990), a lowrider is “any automobile, van, pickup truck, motorcycle, or bicycle lowered to within inches of the road. It refers as well to any individual or club associated with the style and the ‘ride’ characterized as ‘low and slow, mean and clean’” (p. 85). On the other hand, Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) prefers to refer to lowriding as a status symbol, as a metaphor of community affirmation and identification, one that goes beyond the car itself (p. 60).

Rafaela Castro (2001) argues that the use of the single term “lowrider” to describe indistinguishably the car, their community, and the car owner, is evidence of its development from an oral tradition, as an expression of vernacular speech. However, in order to differentiate both and help the reader, “lowriders” with a lower case will refer to the automobiles, while I am following Rubén Mendoza’s (2000) use of the term “lowrider” to refer to “the customized automobile,” and the form “low-rider” with a dash to refer to “the aficionado, enthusiast, or [car] owner” (p. 3) respectively. For those cases where I need to refer to both, the car and the individuals, I will use the form “low/rider.” Simultaneously, where the word “lowrider” is used as an adjective to describe, qualify, or define a subject/noun, the term “lowrider” will be used with a lower case, such in the cases of “lowrider painter,” “lowrider car owner,” “lowrider community,” “lowrider car club,” etc. It is important to note that other scholars, as well as *Lowrider Magazine*,



do not create these distinctions<sup>1</sup> but it is necessary in the context of this study in order to understand the distinctions and complexities between the different groups.

Lowriders have been linked to gangs and street violence, in part because of similarities in their urban intercity aesthetics, previous gang experience of some of their members, and the Latino male-centered structures associated with car clubs. This misunderstanding about low-riders as gang members, mixed with racial and xenophobic prejudices, have motivated many anti-lowrider laws that prohibit or limit cruising and car club gathering, forcing low-riders to reduce their public expressions. The first anti-lowrider law was introduced in September of 1959, in California, (Vehicle code #24008). This law prohibits cars from riding on the streets if any of its components is lower than the bottom edge of the wheel rim. Similar anti-cruising laws have been introduced and implemented in other jurisdictions (Pennsylvania, 1988; Milwaukee, 1990; Minnesota, 1992; Phoenix, 1996; St. Louis, 1999 failed; Utah, 2000). This pattern has also followed other countries, such as Japan where the city of Yokohama passed its first anti-hydraulics law in 1991.

The act of monitoring and policing lowriders is not limited to the creation of transit laws. In addition, other more conspicuous laws have been put into place. For example, after the Arizona State Congress failure to pass an Arizona law to prohibit hydraulics in 1982; a systematic process of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the use of the term “lowrider,” refer to Mendoza (2000), Castro (2001), Tatum (2001), Cutler (1990), and Gaspar de Alba, (1998).

cruising regulation took place (Penland, 2003, p. 79). In the following years, the congress passed several urban planning ordinances that transformed the life of low-riders along Central Avenue, the main historical artery for cruising. The neighborhood associations located along Central Avenue (between Indian School Rd. and Fillmore Rd.) started to limit the access into their neighborhoods by creating gardens circles in those streets that connect directly to Central Avenue. This was only possible because the city allowed these associations to gain control over public spaces. The justification given at that time was the desire to keep noise and dangerous traffic from residential areas. However, the design of the gardens, the creation of roundabouts, and the introduction of speed bumps have targeted low-riders and force them out of downtown Phoenix. In this case, the policing and control over lowrider development and performance was defined by a large number of players within the larger legal community, in this case, the Arizona State Congress, the police, the home owner associations, as well as urban planners.

During my research, however, I have not found the experience of gangs as a central component of the lowrider community. On the contrary, lowriders car clubs can be perceived as an alternative to the experience of violence associated with gangs. Involvement in car clubs and the requirements in term of time and deployment of resources represent a means for Chicana/os to focus their attention away from gangs. This is

explained in detail on Appendix A, in the section title “The Low n’ Slow as an alternative to violence” (p. 325).

Nevertheless, low/riders have established a mastery of visual narrative. They use color, form transformations, images, light, and popular iconography as persuasive elements in reaching their audience and their members. In my previous work on my Master of Science in Design (Industrial Design) on the topic of lowriders (2003), I discovered that the painter-artist and not the car owner exercised the predominant control of the process of selection and production of the color, graphics and iconography. It is the goal of this research to focus on the use, by low-riders, of color as a narrative and its implications as an element for cultural differentiation and definition.

Throughout my ethnographic research, I found that most of the paint jobs and modifications of the cars have their intrinsic genesis in the Chicanos’ unique cultural experience of geographic dispersal over the American Southwest as well as their longstanding historic battle over forced enculturation and subordination. Through its enhanced graphical reality, the car itself has become a medium of transgression that embraces a role of public discourse of narrative broadcasting that expresses the political, cultural, and religious values of this community. I have found that low-riders do not simply use the car as an object to express their culture; their objects (cars) also serve to perpetuate culture itself. In what I have called the *reconstruction of Aztlán*, I argue that the car appropriation by low-riders is not an effect of, but rather an embodiment of a response to the intrinsic

human need to re-define new spaces and visual paradigms. These new and personalized pleasures or comfort zones harmonize the real and the unreal worlds reflecting the economic and political struggles in and around the barrio. During my research, I found the existence of a rigorous and organized collective-communal design methodology used by lowrider owners, car clubs, and painters in the definition of the car's motifs. Such a methodology allows the car to become a mobile storyteller by social agreement.

I argue that the use and rearranging of mainstream icons and decorative motives by low-riders must be interpreted within a process that questions mainstream cultural ideology and simultaneously redefines their relationship with history and their physical space. It can be argued that color is purposely incorporated as a valuable element of their persuading discourse. Few car painters or car owners have formal training in color interpretation, theory, or history. However, their car designs follow a well-defined structural system motivated and informed by their emotions and awareness of their surroundings, which also includes the presence of a highly codified system of expectations by car clubs, painters, and other members of the Low n' Slow community. Color has power within low/riders, to the point that, in many cases, color is the only transformation executed on a car. Many cars are named after their color and their symbology is rearranged to reinforce color's cultural significance. As with any of the other transformations, color is not an arbitrary choice, it follows a deliberate process of selection. Color has agency because it is capable of producing

action and creating change. The use of color results from culturally-driven forces, and it is framed in time and space.

In the case of lowriders, color is individually and collectively constructed by social relationships among the car club members, the owners, and the painters. Color is used to reinforce the car's broadcast representation system. My previous observations, done as part of my master in design work, have shown a recurring use of analogous or complementary color combinations in the graphic composition of cars that accentuated the narrative component of their visual production. Color as narrative reveals its role as a tool to express agency.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This research studies the design element of color as expressed with/in the visual production of lowriders. Consequently, it will examine the relationships among uses, production, and practices associated with the selection to color in these automobiles (see Figure 1). The central intent of this research is to explore and understand the social meanings of color in the production of Chicana/o<sup>2</sup> identity and nationalism as expressed and

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<sup>2</sup> Chicana/o: Chicana/o is a cultural self identified term for persons who live in the United States and have a strong sense of Mexican-American ethnic heritage and identity and an accompanying political consciousness. The term's meaning has changed over time and varies regionally. The term *Chicana/o* was taken up in the mid 1960s by Mexican American Political or Civic Rights activists to define and differentiate a community bound by a common ethnic past, the experience of colonization and oppression living in the United States, especially in the Southwest. Today the terms have transcended the geographical boundaries to define a stage of commitment to social justice and human right struggles.

reinforced through lowrider cars. This research will include an examination of those customized cars present in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area, especially in the cities of Mesa, Avondale, Tempe, and Phoenix. It includes the experience of lowrider car owners, car painters, and local enthusiasts.



*Figure 1. In design, culture can be evaluated as a dynamic equation of people, their objects, and the practices and rituals around them.*

This is a qualitative research based on *observations, interviews, and photo visual data*. The data collection was done at lowrider car shows and public car club events. Most of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, but the options of phone interviews were not discarded to accommodate research subjects. In addition to interviews and direct observation, I visited the studios of several car painters. The combination and implementation of these techniques represents the core methodological body of this research.

This research argues that through the use, manipulation, and implementation of visual/design elements, low/riders challenge, transgress, and resist preconceived notions of space, aesthetic hegemony, and social disparity. In this case, low-riders use color as a cultural expression, a pivotal element with which to narrate, manifest, and retell their stories of struggle and endurance.

### **INVESTIGATIVE PURPOSE**

This research will examine how, within lowrider cars, color is used and manipulated as a design element. Further, I will show how color is embraced in the construction of visual narratives, and in relation to individual and collective Chicana/o identities. Simultaneously, this research will frame design production and color use as intrinsic to the response (both culturally and individually) of borderland experiences and marginalization of Chicana/os in the United States.

### **RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

Quintessentially, color is an important element in the design of lowriders, notably in relation to its graphics, interiors, and paint jobs. The selection of color does not happen randomly, it responds to a low-rider's experience as disenfranchised member of a Chicana/o community and as an element of 'difference.' In lowrider culture, color works on multiple levels.

Such levels are not limited to basic aesthetic roles, but they are also employed as elements for cultural dispute, contestation, and self-definition.

## **OBJECTIVES**

### **Broad Objectives:**

1. To study how design affects the process of cultural exchange and re-appropriation of designed objects.
2. To investigate how the design processes of transformation and manipulation of products of mass consumption is affected by cultural, social, and economical factors.
3. To explore the design element of color as it is affected by factors related to self-valorization and communal identity.
4. To analyze design customizations as result of the interaction among objects, processes and meanings in the manner of cultural exchange.
5. To embrace a new dictum of *form and function follow culture* as related to the notion of design for cultural identity and autonomy.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To advance the understanding of design in Chicana/o visual production.
2. To explore the meanings surrounding the use of color in lowriders, as expression of the Chicana/o cultural experience.



3. To develop an innovative design research informed by Chicana/o cultural studies and ethnography.
4. To study Chicana/o visual and material production as a design process.
5. Explore the implementation of experimental methodologies to the study of Chicana/o's visual material culture in the context of a 'third space'<sup>3</sup>.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that guide this investigation are grounded in the triad Owner-Painter-Car Clubs as the central protagonists in the development of color in these customized cars (see Figure 2).

### Primary

1. What role does color play for low-riders in the perception and explanation of their Chicana/o cultural background?
2. How color is negotiated by the lowrider Chicana/o community through their cars?
3. What design methodology do lowrider painters use when selecting their palette of colors?

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<sup>3</sup> Third space: A conceptual area that exists in-between conventional categories of race, gender, and national identities. It is a dynamic state of hybridity, and fluidity. This term refers to the space that is not here or there but in-between, similar to the concepts of *Chora* by Plato, *Heterotopias* by Foucault, or those of *contact zone* by Mary Louise Pratt (1991). All these concepts will be explained in Chapter IV 'Contextualizing Lowriders,' as they all related to Chicana/o Studies and the analysis of Chicana/o material culture.

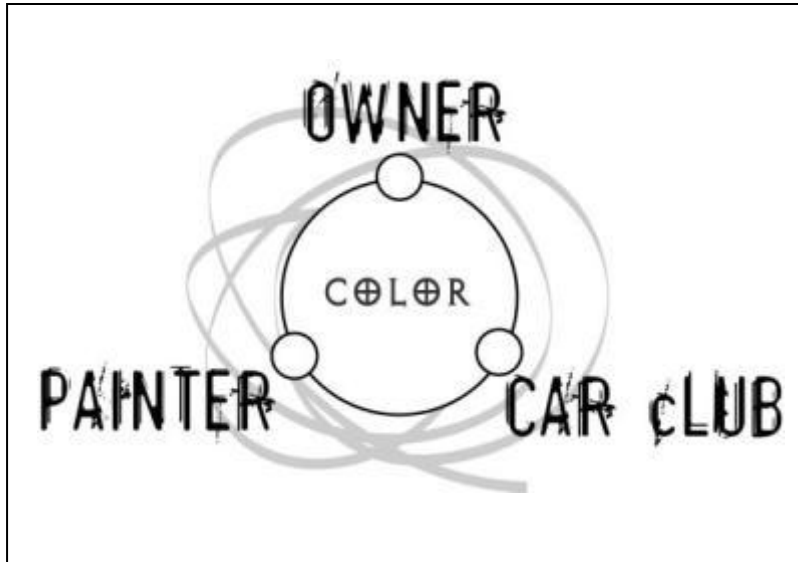
4. How is color used by low-riders as an element of resistance or transgression in their car customizations?
5. How do low-riders' social environments and/or history define their use/selection of color?

### **Secondary**

1. How are design and color utilized as elements for individual/collective identification in lowriders?
2. How do car clubs influence the design process and the selection of color? Do lowrider car clubs differentiate themselves by the selection and use of color? How do car clubs intervene in the selection of painters?
3. What is the role of painters, car clubs, mass media, and owners in the use and selection of colors for their lowrider cars?

### **Tertiary**

1. What is the role of color in the definition of the social identity of the cars?
2. What is the relation between color and barrio spatiality? How is color used to define and delimit space in their cars?
3. How is color gendered by low-riders?



*Figure 2. Color selection in lowriding emerges as product of the interaction of painters, the car owners, and the car clubs.*

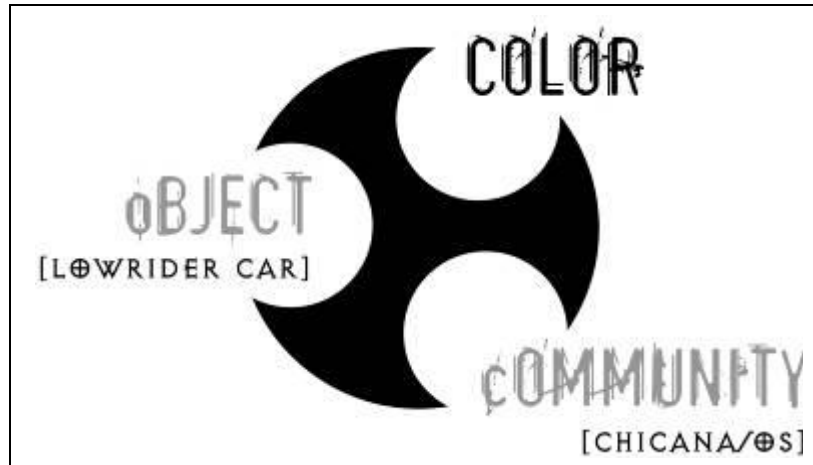
## **RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH**

The concept of design has change over time. As Victor Margolin (2002) argues in his book *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies*, early definitions on design were “static one[s] that w[ere] inextricably bound to the object” (106). However, today’s design is perceived as a human practice that “underlies everything in our culture, both material and immaterial” that surround the processes, practices and uses of objects (107). Margolin, referring to Herbert Simon, explains that Simon “has gone so far as to consider design to be a new ‘science of the artificial’” (Margolin, 2002, p. 107) and consequently is not bound exclusively to the object. In this regard, design is about people; their interaction with objects, the processes surrounding their production, their use of objects (materiality). In addition,

design embrace people's culture and the multiple social influences and values surrounding manufactured goods (immateriality). Consequently, design as cultural production is marked by the political affairs of a time and a place.

The study of objects, especially those that have been transformed and customized, provides the opportunity for design to understand a community. This research explores the design experience of low-riders through their visual language as it is expressed by the color in their cars as well as the material productions surrounding the cars. Since design deals with people and the values, meanings and practices surrounding their objects, it is crucial for design to study how different groups manifest and identify themselves through materiality.

In a field such as design, which is traditionally loaded with Western derived conceptions of beauty and aesthetics, the validation of knowledge has been defined mostly by Eurocentric concepts of taste, that create categories of 'inclusion and/or exclusion.' Because of this, it is important for design research to explore the productions of groups that have been conventionally excluded from this binary. The exclusion of these groups, as valid design producers and their productions, represents a serious ethnocentric misconception on the part of design; a serious flaw that promotes one group's design experience over others (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3. The study of color requires the understanding of the object as well as its social/cultural context expressed by the community.*

On one hand, the increasing presence of Chicano and Latinos in the United States, especially in the Southwest, represents a unique opportunity for the exploration of a society that is undergoing a significant demographic transformation in terms of the consequences and repercussions for design. In addition, the Chicano/Latino relevance for design should not be based only in terms of demographics, but rather in the imperative to preserve and perpetuate the visual languages and design metaphors present in this group.

As a traditionally disenfranchised community, Chicanos and Latinos in the United States have been engaged in a rich material production throughout the 'borderlands.' This kind of research helps us, as designers, to embrace more fully the relevance of social change as expressed by ethnic design.

Vernacular and cultural productions are important fields of academic research for design because they can help promote a process of decentralization of the field. This approach purposely detaches from a Eurocentric monovisual language toward a transdisciplinary all-human-centric approach that embraces cultural differences in matters of material production, while simultaneously incorporating the 'disenfranchised' voice of those located in the margins. Finally, this research, as a specific exploration of color within the Chicana/o community, represents a pioneering effort to examine the notions of the uses, variations, and manipulations of formal design elements inside the lowrider/Chicano community, with specific reference to the Valley of the Sun<sup>4</sup>.



*Figure 4. An image of one of the most famous lowrider cars, "Gypsy Rose," a 1964 Chevrolet Impala owned by Jesse Valdez, at the Peterson Automobile Museum, Los Angeles, C.A.*

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<sup>4</sup> Valley of the Sun: The Greater metropolitan area of Phoenix, Arizona. This area includes the cities of Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe, Gilbert, and some sections of Avondale, Scottsdale, and Ahwatukee.

## **CHAPTER II METHODOLOGY - "FILLING THE TANK"**

### **RESEARCHING CHICANA/O COMMUNITIES**

My immersion over the years as a recurring visitor and observer of the lowrider community in Phoenix has produced a substantial list of contacts. Some of them have shown to be outstanding and important research associates. It is only after several years, that I have finally achieved a level of comfort in navigating their network, especially after the creation of relationships of mutual trust with key members of their community. In addition, I have engaged in the study of the material available regarding ethnographic research within the Chicana/o community. This educational process has included the consultation of several case studies and experiences of fieldwork with this community as well as the intersectionality of methods and theory. Previous experience has shown that an extended period of time must be devoted to the selection and implementation of research methods and to data collection, especially when researching a community that traditionally has been disfranchised culturally and economically from the mainstream, such as has been the case with Chicanas/os in general and, in particular, low-riders. Because of their experience of discrimination and oppression, as expressed by the implementation over the years of multiple city laws that have prohibited, restricted, and penalized cruising, low-riders tend to be a reserved community and highly selective about revealing information and allowing full access to their activities to outsiders. This

mistrust has increased in the last several years because of the political unrest in Arizona, which has targeted Latino/Chicano communities in particular. Therefore, to increase the margin of reliability of the results from this research, the creation of culturally-sensitive research instruments has been conceptualized, and special value has been given to allow low-riders to express their opinions directly and in their own terms. Further, I recognize the benefits as the result of my gender, my shared ethnicity, and my bilingual abilities, not that they are requirements in order to research Chicana/o Communities “...but it does help” (Blea, 1995, p. 54). In addition, I also embarked in the study of Chicana/o borderland theory, Chicana/o Southwest history, and the analysis of their cultural expressions in order to achieve the requisite intellectual tools to engage in a well-conceived, intensive, and viable study of lowriders.

## **RESEARCH IDEOLOGY**

This research addresses the Chicano/US Latino visual production from the point of view of color and with particular regard to manufactured objects such as lowriders. Its purpose is to transcend the standard approach for research by exploring the implementation of a unique methodology that takes into consideration the distinctiveness of this community. As ethnographic research, this research is particularly committed to providing an environment that permits the expression of a ‘voice’ from these ‘everyday designers’ and allowing low-riders to ‘talk’ about color in their own terms.



Imbued with a new and multifaceted methodological approach, this exploration calls attention to a de-centered/reflexive ethnography that considers my influence in the group. This approach does not focus its methodology solely on the implementation of research tools and the data collection, but it also places emphasis on the selection and interpretation of information. This research expressly does not 'eroticize' or romanticize low-rider productions (which would otherwise imply a deviant, primitive, and outsider status), but rather it is based in the fundamental understanding that their visual interactions are a component of their historic (time) and environmental (place) situation. In an effort to avoid Eurocentric biases when dealing with this research topic, the concept of design in this research will not be sequestered to simple binary categories such as culture/subculture, top/bottom or center/periphery. In this case, design is seen as an 'everyday' practice that is common to the human condition where, culturally speaking, I believe no one design is considered to be better than any other.

In order to develop this approach, my theoretical thinking has been nurtured by the work of a number of writers, such as<sup>5</sup>: Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Arjun Appadurai (1988), Michel Foucault (2003), Nestor Garcia Canclini (2005), Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), Chela Sandoval (2000), Dick Hebdige (1979), Roland Barthes (2000), Mike Davis (2001), Renato Rosaldo (1993), Paul Du Gay (1997), Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998), Brenda Jo Bright

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<sup>5</sup> See bibliography for a detailed description of referential works.

(1995), Emma Perez (1999), Daniel Miller (2004), George Lipsitz (1997, 2001) Thomas Ybarra (1985), and Clifford Geertz (1977).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

In a deliberately careful manner, this qualitative research is based on ethnographic observations, personal testimonies, interviews, and photo narrative data collection. Further, this approach positions me as an observer. As will be explained in this section, the data collection was performed at lowrider car shows, public car club events, and public lowriders car cruising. All of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format following the requirements stated by the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (see Appendix C on Human Subjects). In addition to interviews and direct observations, I visited the studios of several lowrider car painters (see description of methods for a detail explanation of each one). The combination and implementation of these techniques represented the core data body of this research.

Grounding this research in a decolonial approach,<sup>6</sup> it proved to be crucial for me to start from the premise that there is already a visual meta-language, or knowledge set scripted within the visual production of

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<sup>6</sup> Decolonial Methodology: In this case, the term refers to a conscious evaluation and questioning of the processes used in the creation, verification, and authentication of knowledge. Traditionally it calls for a decentralization of European colonizing approaches based on the binary of insider/outsider, center, and periphery. This methodological approach is grounded in the work of two scholars, Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*.

lowriders. Hence, his job as a researcher was not one of ‘discovery’ or to ‘give sense’ to his research findings. Instead, he wanted those finding to unveil patterns and recurrences. Therefore, during the course of this research, the lowrider community and the people interviewed by this researcher were always understood as collaborators and co-researchers — as the authentic experts in the topic. I also tried to recognize his advantage/privilege power position in mainstream society, and tried to ‘silence’ his own voice in order to give the highest priority to the voice of the community — notably, in a way that allows low-riders to express their relation and interaction with color with minimal interference from me, as the researcher. Rather than being an academic safari into low/riders, this constituted an invitation that could be withdrawn by the community at any given time.

The decolonial spirit that motivates this methodology is not based necessarily in the introduction of new research tools or instruments, but rather adheres to an approach involving the community, and the methods, from a de-centered perspective, one that places the individual and the community under study first, not academia or the final dissertation document. This approach can be explained by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006), in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*. As she says these new methodologies “are not claimed to be entirely indigenous or to have been created by indigenous researchers [... they] are often a mix of existing methodological approaches and indigenous practices” (142-143). The uniqueness of these methods reside in their intentionality as part of a theory project for the

oppressed, as she explains, “within an indigenous framework, methodological debates are ones concerned with the broader politics and strategic goals of indigenous research” (142-143). In this context, all the “results” unveiled remain as intellectual property of the community. In general, they possess the potential scope to help the community to improve, liberate, emancipate, and ultimately to persuade them of their right to be happy within and on their own terms.

The methods used for this research followed these four categories

- a. Ethnographic observations
- b. Personal testimonies and interviews
- c. Group *coloquios* (*colloquies*) or Resolanas
- d. Photo narratives and pictograms.

### **A. Ethnographic Observations**

This research will focus on those customized cars located in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area, especially the cities of Mesa, Avondale, Tempe, and Phoenix. The observations took place over a period of more than six years, and involved me attending several lowrider events: 18 car shows, 3 car clubs meeting, five auto shops, two picnics, as well as, two cultural center/museum organized events, in addition to several informal street corner cruising sites as an observer (see Figure 5). During those multiple visits, I collected a total of more than 1800 pictures and 145 videos, which are catalogued by topics (see Figure 8).



Figure 5. An image showing some of multiple car shows and events attended by myself as part of this research.

In addition, this period included the time during and subsequent to the conclusion of the work on my Master of Science in Design (Industrial Design) on the topic of lowriders (2003). Some visits to lowriders events took place in California, specifically in Oxnard, Ventura, and Santa Barbara (where I lived from 2006-2010), with occasional visits to the Phoenix area for several lowrider exhibitions and car show events. These months were reserved for the implementation of the interviews, questionnaires, and *resolanas* (group coloquios-dialogues), as well as the *testimonios* (testimonies)<sup>7</sup>. A second round of ethnographic research, the one specifically devoted to the topic of color, took place over a period of seven months, starting during the spring of 2010 and ending in 2011. During this time, a

<sup>7</sup> For a description of these two terms, methods, see the next sections, pages 25-28.

total of 24 collective and individual interviews occurred with 19 different people. The fall 2010, and the spring of 2011 were spent entirely on data analysis and dissertation writing.

### **B. Personal Testimonies (*testimonios*) and Interviews**

The 24 interviews, with 19 people, followed a semi-structured format and were conducted on a flexible structure consisting of pre-defined open-ended questions on color use and color interpretation. A description of the questionnaire used as guide for the interview can be found in Appendix B. For the most part individuals engaged in a guided monologue that enabled them to tell stories freely. I structured the interviews by making minimal inquiries at the beginning and allowing the individual interviewed to be free to express his/her story as the interview progressed.

On several occasions, I, as the interviewer, allowed for slight divergences from the prepared questions in order to pursue an idea/concept in more detail. Essentially, three main subjects were defined as crucial in the selection and manipulation of color within lowriders. The interview questionnaire varied according to the subject's role as painter, car owner, or spectator. In addition to the conventional process of taking notes, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. As explained before, a total of 19 low-riders were interviewed specifically for the topic of color, of which 18 were males, and two were females, all of them between the ages of 25 - 54 years. Sometimes it was not an easy task to obtain an interview; the ratio was

almost 3:1, for each interview granted, interviewees canceled three other appointments, or they did not show up at all. Therefore, the time and place of those interviews were highly defined by lowrider, very early in the morning before work, or late, after their family affairs were completed (see Figure 6).



*Figure 6. A picture of myself (fourth from the left) during a group interview in Mesa, AZ. From left to right: Vince Guitierrez, Manny Cisneros, Danny Galvez "Danny D.", myself, and Efrain Gonzalez "Bugs."*

Each interview took an average of 90-120 minutes. On many occasions, several interviews were scheduled with the same individual at different times in order to increase the depth of the material provided. All of them have been involved with the lowrider community for 10-30 years, as painters, or as lowrider enthusiasts. They are presidents of car clubs, national and local event organizers, and judges for car shows. They are what we may call seasoned low-riders, as many of them were the first ones to

bring lowriding into Arizona from California.

### **C. Resolanas (Group Coloquios-dialogues).**

*Resolana* derives from *resol* (the glare or reflection of the sun) and refers to the sunny side of buildings where [residents] in Northern New Mexico, protected from the elements, gather to talk. As individuals get together, a spiral of thought and action evolves and shift from the individuals to the group. This 'give and take' of ideas leads to a body of knowledge, objectified and shared — thus serving as a basis for action. "A *Resolana* is a [collective] dialog [...] a sharing of meaning that leads toward [...] consensual validation" (T. Atencio and Consuelo Pacheco, 1981). *Resolanas* are about collective talk-dialogue-share-learning that leads to building knowledge for the benefit of everyone.

One *resolana*, at Mesa Southwest Museum (53 N. Macdonald St, Mesa, AZ), took place on Sept 2, 2008, 6:00 pm where 10 low-riders and family members attended. This was an occasion to get together with the intention to 'talk' about lowriders in one of the gathering places of a local Mesa lowriders car club. The session started with some oldies Chicano music to welcome everyone and stimulate dialogue. With no formal format or agenda, the only goal consisted of exchanging ideas and building on them to generate collective discussion. I recorded the conversations and facilitated the discussions. Everyone was aware that the *Resolana* could be stopped at anytime at the discretion of its participants/researchers. After 45 minutes, there was a 10 minutes recess, and it began again for another 45 minutes.



The total time did not exceed more than two hours to avoid exhausting the participants. To promote a familiar/casual environment, refreshments were available during the resolana. For the purposes of this research on the subject of color, the resolana was envisioned as a collective instrument for mutual 'enlightenment' through the dynamics of the knowledge of the community.

#### **D. Photo Journals.**

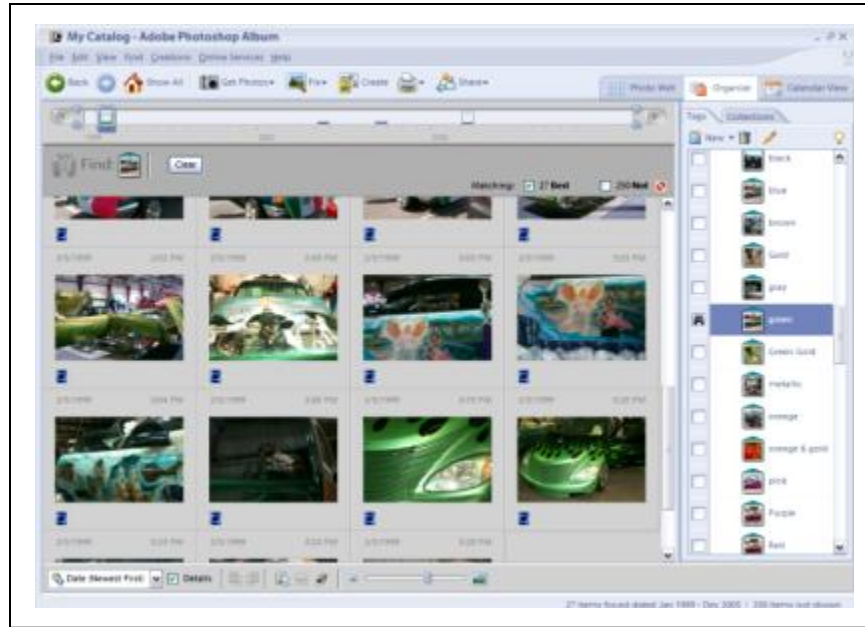
Here the participants, low-rider car club members, were given a disposable camera to collect pictures during the *Lowrider Magazine* Super Show at the Phoenix Fairgrounds, AZ on March 03, 2007 (see Figure 7). They were asked to take pictures of what they found to be more relevant, attractive, or important for them with respect to color. Given at the entrance/beginning of the event, the cameras were collected at the exit/end of the show. Once the pictures were developed, I met, one on one, with each low-rider who provided pictures, to discuss in detail his selections, motivations and relationships to color. The second meeting occurred based on the report created by the pictures. All the pictures collected were catalogued by topics and key terms, as a database of visual information.



*Figure 7. Image showing some of the material collected during the photo journals.*

### **E. Picture (Photo) Narratives**

In this case, a series of individualized face-to-face meetings were scheduled with low-riders. Sometimes this meeting comprised part of the interviews as a final activity. During these meetings, different pictures of selected prize-winning local cars were shown to the low-riders. They were asked to select the cars they identified as 'better' exponents of lowrider color aesthetics, and they were asked to explain why. There were no formally-structured questions but rather an open space for low-riders to focus on the subject. In many cases, the pictures served as an open environment to encourage engagement and further discussion regarding color.



*Figure 8. A screen shot of the picture database, organized by topics, to facilitate searching and analysis.*

#### **F. Study Cases:**

This method of collecting data is based on the study of particular automobiles, their color, and graphics used. For this research case, I met with the car owner and interviewed him/her about the process of color selection, its motivation, and scope for the overall design of this particular car. This more formal interview is devoted to the discussion of the particulars of the car, as well as the relationship with the car club and the rest of the lowrider community.

The combination and implementation of these multi-dimensional and experimental techniques represented the core body of the research methodology. The triangulation of data collection was intended to increase

the validity, legitimacy, and reliability of this research by increasing the amount of information and its data sources. To further augment these methods, I also created a Community Advisory Committee (CAC)<sup>8</sup>. The committee's membership included three local low-riders who have been involved in the organization of low-rider life for an appreciable amount of time, either in serving as presidents of car clubs, in charge of social events, or as actively-involved members of the local/national lowrider network. This advisory committee provided guidance and acted as a consultative resource regarding the announcement of this research, as well as the procedures implemented to enhance participation and/or to mobilize within the local low-rider network. The CAC helped me to gain a more in depth access to the community. They worked exclusively at the community level and aided in the collection of data — further serving as a safeguard for me, to ensure that the community's voice was heard and the results were a valid representation of the life of lowriding.

As shown in Figure 9, each core research question has been paired with one or more of these particular research instruments or methods, in order to facilitate data collection and its analysis, as well as to increase the accuracy of the information. The process of linking these research questions to particular methods provides a clear vantage point from which to understand each instrument as a tool used to clarify a particular aspect

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<sup>8</sup> CAC Members included: Richard Ochoa (Senior Judge for Lowrider Magazine, Phoenix), Johnny Lozoya (Organizer and Promoter, Phoenix) and Luis Miranda (Painter and lowrider owner, Phoenix).

of this research, and as a specific way to achieve individuated answers (see Figure 9).

### **POPULATION SAMPLING, GEOGRAPHIC SIDE, AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

This research was conducted entirely in the Valley of the Sun (in the Phoenix, Arizona Metropolitan Area), specifically in the cities of Mesa, Avondale, Gilbert, Tempe, and Phoenix. Since this research focuses on the experience of lowrider owners, car painters, and local enthusiasts, it did not center on any one specific site but rather encompassed a large area of public car cruising (see Figure 10).

All the participants were lowrider enthusiasts, and all of them belong to at least one of these three categories: (a) lowrider car owners, (b) painters, or (c) involved in the lowrider community for a long time as spectators of car customizations. These three groups have been defined because of their direct and intensive relationship in the process of color selection, interpretation, and consumption of lowriders visuals.

There was no intended or promoted exclusion of any ethnic group in the selection of research participants. However, most of the individuals practicing lowriding tend to be of Chicano/Mexican-American or Latino descent. As this research aspires to understand how they, as a marginal group, use color as a means for self-definition and differentiation, all the participants did ultimately come from this particular ethnic and cultural group.

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Methods of Data Collection</b>	<b>Suggested Method</b>	<b>Analysis Method (Theoretical Approach)</b>
<b>Primary</b>			
How do low-riders perceive color in relation to their Chicana/os cultural background? And Why?		<b>Resolana</b> (Group Colloquies) Interviews Observation	
How is color is negotiated by the Chicano/lowrider community thru their cars?		Resolana <b>Observation</b>	
How do low-riders and painters select their palette of colors? How the painter perceives the process of color use in lowriders?		<b>Questionnaire</b> <b>Resolana</b> <b>Interviews</b>	
How does color work the politics of the 'borderlands'?	Observations Interviews Questionnaires	Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Semiotics</li> <li>- Visual analysis</li> <li>- Historical compilations</li> <li>- Literal Text</li> <li>- Taxonomic organization</li> <li>- Queer Theory</li> <li>- Borderland/Decolonial Theory</li> <li>- Alternative Epistemologies</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary</b>	Group colloquies Testimonies Resolana		
How is color constructed as an element for individual/collective identification in lowriders?	Photo Narrativity Photo analysis Participate Observation Literature Review Car cruising	<b>Observation</b> Resolana Interviews	
Is there any relationship between car clubs and color? Do lowrider car clubs differentiate themselves by the selection and use of color? How do car clubs intervene in the processes of color selection?		Interviews Questionnaire <b>Photo Analysis</b>	
What is the role of Painters, car clubs, mass media, and owners in lowrider's use and selection of colors?		<b>Interviews</b> <b>Resolana</b>	
<b>Tertiary</b>			
What is the role of color in the definition of the social identity of the cars?		<b>Interviews</b> Resolana Observation Car Cruising	
What is the relation between color and barrio spatiality?		<b>Observation</b> Resolana Interviews	
How do low-riders use color to define and delimit space in their cars?		<b>Car Cruising</b> Observation	
How is color is gendered by low-riders?		<b>Observation</b> <b>Photo Analysis</b> Interviews Resolana	

*Figure 9. The original distribution of methods created base on the research questions of this investigation.*

Initially, the participants were contacted at public car shows events, as well as with the help of car club presidents whom I met previously as part of my master's thesis, or by way of a reference from other interviewees. Since this community tends to be a very close within their group and generally reserved toward strangers, personal one-on-one references were highly useful in gaining access to individual members. In addition, the main researcher used a consent form that participants were asked to complete.

All the files containing the data collected, the list of pseudonymous, interview transcripts, schedule of meetings, pictures, electronic files, consent forms, etc., were maintained in a locked and secured place (and one to which only I have access) in my home. As specified by Arizona State University guidelines, these materials will be destroyed within a year after the conclusion and defense of the Ph.D. Dissertation.



*Figure 10. Image from a low-rider family picnic organized in South Phoenix, during spring 2005.*

## VALIDITY AND LIMITATIONS

It is important to recognize some of the limitations and challenges in order to frame and contextualize this research.

- It is not my intention to pronounce the final word or provide a definitive assessment regarding low/riders and their use of color. Instead, I seek to achieve a better and more fully informed understanding of the dynamics among objects, users, and culture in a manner that will enable industrial designers (as cultural producers themselves) to better understand the role that cultural tensions and self valorization play in the process of car customizations and other similar processes.
- This research attempts to analyze cars as very particular objects, which are heavily infused with cultural values in the United States. Consequently, there are many different venues to address the same issue. However, I have decided to accomplish this in part by using borderland and subaltern cultural theory as a means to decentralize a common analysis based exclusively in supply-demand market models. Therefore the theoretical discourse will at times appear as if it is diverging into the 'alien' areas of cultural and ethnic studies. It should be noted that the intention is to arrive at a better grasp of the complexity inherent in this issue. Ultimately, this will increase the toolbox available for designers in their analysis of objects, practices,



and tension around them, and in their study and analysis of the people who enjoy those artifacts.

- I am a member of the Latina/o community, an immigrant in the United States, but not a low-rider or a member of a car club. However, I have made a persistent effort throughout the course of this research to monitor and be aware of my own social position and privileges, and to engage the subjects and the community with the dignity and honor they deserve as members of a larger community and as cohabitants of the United States' barrio<sup>9</sup>
- Because of the limited size of the sampling, and the constraints of the geographical space, this research must be understood as but one in a series of studies that needs to emerge in order to better understand lowriders and the vast array of Chicana/o cultural productions and epistemologies that have emerged from their unique experience.

## **RESEARCH TIMELINE AND PROCESS**

The development of this research can be divided in three distinctive stages.

For the most part they follow a chronological process; in many cases, however, it was required to move back and forth in order to get more information or to verify results. The three stages are: a) Literature Review, b) Field Work, and c) Analysis of the material.

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<sup>9</sup> *Barrio* is a Spanish word that means district or neighborhood, generally refers to a place of cultural, political and economical cohesiveness between its habitants. See Villa (2000), Castro (2001) and Davis (2001).

## A. Literature Review

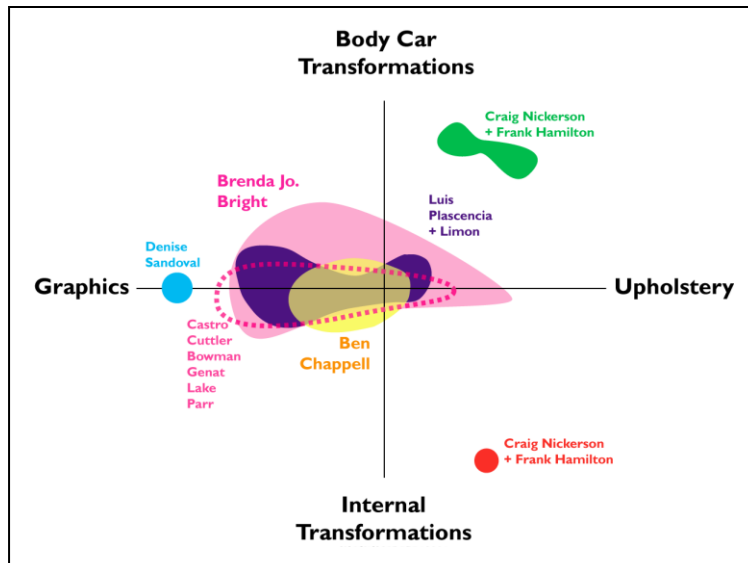
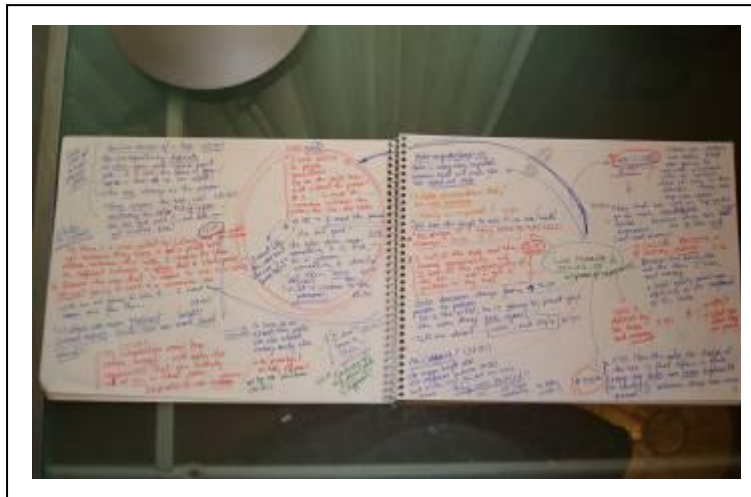


Figure 11. Visualization of the literature review, showing the distributions of scholarship done previously on the topic of car transformations.

The review of literature did not happen all at once; on the contrary, it took place in three distinctive time frames. In the initial phase, this research focused on the exploration of the body of literature available about low/riders in order to map similarities, connections, and gaps in research already done. This first stage was crucial to understand areas where this new research can take place, as they overlap with the interest of design theory. In order to achieve this, I moved into a second stage, where I developed visual maps of the main research areas available, and defined gaps or deficiencies in the body of literature (see Figure 11). This is how the topic of the low-rider use of color became the area of interest for this dissertation, as there was no

research done in this area. The third stage of the literature review focused on the gathering of the theoretical tools and the information needed to carry on this research on color and lowriders. This third wave of research included the areas of Chicana/o history, border studies, Chicana/o aesthetics, border epistemology, methodology, and color.



*Figure 12. Example of the mind mapping of an interview.*

## **B. Ethnography.**

As explained in the previous section that describes the methods used, the first phase of this research focused on gathering ethnographic material, following guidelines set by the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (see Appendix C). The mind mapping, visual grouping, and transcription of the interviews defined the second part of this ethnographic research (see Figure 12). This visual technique is an effective tool by which

to organize the vast material available in order to analyze it, and identify similarities, contradictions, and patterns.

### **C. Analysis and Writing.**

Analysis of the research and writing did not happen only at the end of this research, but as the dissertation was developing. Certainly, the analysis and writing of the ethnographic findings and the conclusions happened late in this research, but the analysis and the cognitive process associated with gathering information, research the literature available, observations, and writing, represented also part of the process of discernment about the topic in discussion.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW - "THE CAR MANUAL"**

#### **ON COLOR**

##### **Introducing Color**

"The mystery of color lies in the fact that it evaded this fate because, while vital to human existence, it could never be understood" (Taussig, 2009, p. 16).

Color can be both a loaded term and one that is broadly defined. For example, use it as a search term in a popular web engine, such as Google, and you can retrieve over 881 million result entries in less than a minute. Certainly, color has been an important component of our human experience, to the point that we organize many of life's activities around color and our perception of colors. Today, for example, in the United States, traffic signaling is profoundly organized by color, and our language is loaded with color-based expressions and idioms. Color has intrigued human intellect for many centuries, and multiple theories have been developed around it. These theories have evolved along with the human understanding regarding light and our behavior changes around color; from scientific approaches regarding the composition of color to the relations with higher power or good fortune, as well as psychological and marketing responses, color has long intrigued humans (Birren, 2006, p. 3-22). Color experience is such intrinsic part of our

human condition that we take it for granted. Certainly, on one level or another, we all are experts of color decoding.

Despite its ubiquity, color is nevertheless a complex term, especially within the scope of this dissertation. On one hand, color will be examined as a physical and emotional quality of our visual experience and of the objects that surround us. On the other hand, color also refers to socially generated differences related to skin pigmentation, culture, and race, and the political manifestations of those differences. As the nature of this research and its researcher (as a man of color) can be defined in the American context in a color-specific way, and given the nature of this research in its simultaneous exploration of the use of color in a community of color (such as lowriders), the interaction between both the aesthetic and the racial meanings associated to the term color can be viewed as closely allied and tightly interconnected entities. The scope of this chapter is to attempt to understand the distinctive line and connections between: (a) those discourses that use color as a divisive instrument that can be used to oppress or validate oppression toward not-centered-western communities, sometimes called the Other, and (b) simultaneously try to discern the unique approaches that these communities take toward color. This analysis between the uses of color as a means for self-valorization, a mechanism for self-differentiation in oppressed communities such as Chicana/os, and those discourses around oppression are crucial to set the theoretical background for further study of the use of color by low-riders.

Therefore, I believe it necessary to explore color bimodally. First, color will be studied as an exclusive perceptual experience, as an aesthetic design principle, and as a characteristic of our visual world. Here, special focus will be given to the evolving state of our understanding about color, its physical nature, and our emotional relationship with it. Next, the aesthetic concept of color will be analyzed as it pertains to social discourse constructions about minorities or subaltern communities — particularly regarding the way color-specific terminology often characterizes these communities as inferior, primitive or underdeveloped. This section is not about ethnic differences on color use, but rather about how color is utilized as a parameter to create false valorizations or assumptions about these subaltern communities, especially as they are associated with taste, intellectual proficiency, and values of ownership. Both concepts, color as aesthetic element and color as racial differentiator exemplify in my opinion, two of the crucial tensions associated with the politics of modernity and post-modernity, the center and the periphery, the developed North and the undeveloped South. I argue that these modernist assumptions about color, color use, and their relationship to class, race, and ethnicity have their early European materializations as by-products of the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli, in what Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (2004) defines as “the theology of the image, in particular, idolatry and iconoclasm” (p. 125). Dating back from the sixteenth century, color, color theory, and the interpretation of color in the West and its territories have

been marked by tensions fostered by certain Protestant ethical values (e.g., austerity, self-mortification, and redemption). The systemization of such values often worked not only to advance the Protestant belief system and the interests of its members, but it was also used to regulate others and maintain social inequities for non-Protestant groups. Certainly, this research centers on Latinos, color and low/riders, but it would not be complete without a brief review of how the current academic approach to the analysis of color may well be tinted by the politics of color.

### **What is Color: Color as a Visual Perceptual Experience**

To begin this portion of the analysis, a productive first step involves the exploration of what is color and what generally is understood as color. Color is everywhere and it affects us directly by stimulating vision, one of our five senses. This stimulation happens because of the presence in light of a particular electromagnetic radiation that interacts with light-sensitive cells (rods and cones) in the eyes. They 'translate' the electromagnetic information of light (through a complex network of optic nerves located in the back of the eye) into information that is transported to the brain, where is decoded and connected to other information about our surroundings. Visual data, combined to other sensorial information and previous experiences provides animals and humans the capacity to interact with their environment and their surroundings.



In the animal kingdom, one way color is used is to define procreation practices and sexual patterns in different species. Theories on the evolution of our human perception of color have been linked to our need to survive because color provides important crucial information about food and the dangers of nature. For example, many plants and fruits change their color as they become edible. In addition, many animals use color to advertise their poisonous qualities or as a protective mechanism to camouflage or mimic their surroundings in order to evade predators. Simultaneously, different animals have developed variant types of eyes and vision in accordance to their environmental needs or evolutionary patterns. For example, vision stimulus close to the ultra violet (UV) spectrum is particularly useful for organisms inhabiting shallow waters, since UV light is capable of penetrating up to twenty feet into water. On the other hand, vision paired with high sensorial wave movements is especially useful at night when light is very limited — for example, in the case of bats or animals living in caverns. As mammals and primates, such as humans, specialized in particular environments, their vision adapted by either losing or gaining particular qualities, the use chromatic information.

Studies conducted by Peter G. Kevan and Werner G.K. Backhaus (1998) as well as Friedrich G. Barth (1995) around color evolution in plants and insects suggest that rather than define color development as a one-way route, we must clearly understand color perception, color interaction, and color data collection as a symbiotic process of mutual evolution in which

plants and animals may have affected each other's evolutionary processes. In other words, plants and animals adapted to each other in order to gain the greatest benefits from their environment and to ensure their survival.

In the case of humans, it is important to understand that color experience is intrinsically personal and unique to each individual, even when our bodies share the same mechanical process to decode light and light reflection. Certainly, color perception can be affected by physical components, but color can also be emotionally — and socially constructed through collective agreements and interpretations based upon our life experiences. For example, the meaning of the color red is a social construct, defined by particular physical limitations and our experiences that validate color knowledge. Therefore, the perception of color relates ultimately to our vision consciousness (Kuehni, 2004, p. 30) where our individual experiences are confronted and comprehended within a framework bounded by social sets of visual knowledge. For example, we learn that some particular light stimulus or reflections are red and not blue or yellow.

Rather than referring to language associations to particular colors, we learn to differentiate and discriminate between and among different colors in order to identify individual colors socially in a way that we believe that in the absolute value that red is red and blue is blue. Therefore, a language may supply names for colors, but not before these colors have been culturally defined as cohesive entities. Of course, once such categories have been determined cross-language designations are possible, permitting, for

example, 'red,' 'rojo,' or 'rosso' to be understood as the same, even when 'our' red is not always the same *rosso* seen by another culture. Some linguists have even classified societies based on the number of color terms they have established.<sup>10</sup> This can raise further questions: are all colors unique entities? Do all colors exist in all cultures independently only if terms have been identified for them? Can some cultural groups have colors that other groups cannot see (outside physical limitations)? Current research has established that color is "simply one interdependent aspect in an array that includes place, form, [and] motion" (Kuehni, 2004, p. 37). Therefore, color cannot be studied in a vacuum, but instead it needs to be considered in conjunction with the rest of human perceptive experience.

### **A Brief Review of the History of Color Theory**

"Explanations of psychological and psychical phenomena are not always easy... There are in man many strange and inexplicable mysteries regarding color" (Faber Birren, 2006, p. 199).

It has been estimated that within normal vision conditions and a neutral background, people can perceive up to two million different colors (Kuehni, p. 53). The task of organizing, managing, and providing sense to this

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<sup>10</sup> Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (2000) argue that it is possible to organize cultures base on the development of their language about color and color terms. They define seven levels to organize languages. They position English at the top, level VII with eleven basic color terms. This model is very problematic by their heavy Eurocentric assumptions. I will discuss in the chapter on the politics of color why those assumptions are intrinsically racist.

vast array of visual stimuli is not new. In Western societies, the first effort to organize and comprehend color was found in the Greek philosophers of antiquity. Pythagoras (570? - 495 BCE), in addition to his contributions to geometry and mathematics, also tried to explain color. For him and his followers, color resulted from a hot/warm projection coming from the human eye that is reflected onto cold objects. For them, color existed as part of the thermal reaction with the object's surface (or chroma) and eye emanations.

Following Pythagoras, another Greek philosopher, Empedocles (490 - 430 BCE), developed his own color theory. In a similar vein, his theory held that color came from not only emissions from the eye but also from emissions from objects. He related colors to the classical five elements and their locations in or outside of the eye. For Empedocles, fire and water were located within the eye, while air and earth were situated outside. In his view, colors came to exist from the reaction of those inside/outside elements. Later, this theory was also reproduced by Plato (427? - 347 BCE), with his explanation concerning the existence of colored rays that came from the eye and that interacted with particles coming from objects. And, hence, it is from that interaction between both of them that color is created. For Plato, the mixture of the basic four colors resulted in the formation of all other colors.

It can be argued that these theories tend to be presented as fragmentary in nature, but it is not until Aristotle (384 - 322 BCE) that the first comprehensive theory on color came to be developed. He proposed the

color comes from God, as invisible colored rays, and it is directly related to the nature of matter. For him, color rays interact with the object and its intrinsic four elements, (earth, fire, wind, water) and a fifth one, *aethe*. For Aristotle, color resided within a spectrum between total darkness and total light, as a direct extrapolation of natural observations between day and night. Aristotle limited the scope of his research to the mixture of colored solutions and then projected into light. He defined seven colors, which ranged on the side of the spectrum from pure white to total black on the other side. Between these two extremes, Aristotle located the other colors that are now defined as yellow, red, purple, green, and blue.

Later on, and similar to Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci positioned color in a continuum between two extremes of light and dark, what he called the *chiaroscuro*. He used the theory of *chiaroscuro* to reinforce visual depth and perspective in his painting projects. He also produced extensive anatomical analysis on the structure of the eye and the mechanics of eye/brain.

However, our modern understandings of the mechanics of color were not developed until the late seventeenth century, when in 1666 Isaac Newton initiated his research with light using two prisms. Newton refracted white light into the colors of the rainbow, or what he called the “spectrum,” in referring to refer to the array of colors generated when white light deferred through a glass prism. He defined seven colors following the musical scale. He understood that ‘white’ light ‘holds’ all the colors rather than the idea that color consisted of multiple separate colored rays. Positioned along a

wavelength of frequencies, each color has its own frequency range. Therefore, the perceptual experience of color happens within the brain and not outside. In other words, the world that we perceive visually is not colored; our brains create the sensations of colors from electromagnetic stimuli (Kuehni, p. 9). For example, an object is not blue; we read the light waves reflected from it as blue. That object reflects the electromagnetic waves associated to blue and the cone cells of the retina decode that information to the brain, and we see it as blue. Pigments and dyes are substances that by their chemistry reflect particular and consistent light waves.

Newton's theories were not challenged until 1810 when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) published his book *Theory of Color* (1840/2006). Here, Goethe declared Newton's cases as exceptional and not as general rules to define color universally. Goethe's analysis of color and his deliberate connection among color, culture, and race will be discussed in the next section; however, it is important to note that Goethe had a greater interest in the phenomenon of color perception than he did regarding the subject of color mechanics.

Today, the study of the physics of color and color theory has evolved into a vast array of interpretations and distinctions, notably around those between color perception (a) based on the 'color' of the object (related colors) and color perception defined by (b) the light projected on the object (unrelated colors). In addition, several studies have been performed to understand the sources of color in scenarios such as incandescence,

florescent, luminescence, refraction, diffraction, the color qualities of electrical conductors, semiconductors, and colored crystals, as well as in the theorizing of perfect absorber/emitter light objects, or absolute black/white (Kuehni, 1993, *Color: Essence and Logic*, p. 37). The need to unify all the research and to forge a common voice about the topic of color, motivated the formation in 1913 of the *International Commission on Illumination* or CIE (from its French title, the *Commission Internationale de l'éclairage* [CIE]). Their primary objectives concerned the exchange and exploration of matters related to lighting, color, and vision.<sup>11</sup> In 1931, CIE was responsible for developing the first comprehensive numerical matrix for mapping and classifying color.

In 1993, eight global corporations<sup>12</sup> formed the *International Color Consortium (ICC)*. Their key motivation involved developing a universal color managing system that could operate across nations and industries. They were particularly concerned in the standardization of color reproduction in the electronic world by allowing colors to be matched across a range of computer operative systems. Instead of an interest in regulating the manner in which color is generated, ICC wished to work toward defining color reproducible profiles. This has particular relevance today given the growing development of non-press electronic media, such as the Web.

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<sup>11</sup> See CIE official site at <http://www.cie.co.at>

<sup>12</sup> The eight founding members of the ICC were Adobe, Agfa, Apple, Kodak, Microsoft, Silicon Graphics, Sun Microsystems, and Taligent.

Based on their epistemological approaches to color and the nature of the research objectives around color, (for example the reproduction of color, the interaction of color with humans, and/or the study of color environments), I argue that today the fields of color theory and color studies can be divided in three major groups. These three groups are *creational*, *organizational*, and *functional*. The first group, *creational*, conglomerates all those theories that attempt to explain the creation, composition, and reproduction of color as a physical phenomenon. They attempt to understand and resolve human anxieties about the definition and nature of color and what produces it. As discussed previously, the early history of color has been focused primary on these *creational* questions. Physical sciences have led this group for many years. In this case, color is seen as an integral part of the physics of light and the mechanics of vision. From this level, color is understood as a phenomenon that can be qualified, reproduced, and mapped.

Once humans comprehended the constitution of color, they explored how to organize and systematize it by the creation of chromatic matrices and color-based taxonomic value systems. This managing approach is responsible for organizing a comprehensive system around the Color Rosetta/compass that defines fixed categories such as primary and secondary colors, complementary and analogue colors, etc. These organizational approaches have been further delineated into tri-dimensional structures of hues, tones, and intensities of pigments. Subjective assessments such as taste, balance, and harmony have been tied to these organizational systems.



It is important to note that these creational and organizational approaches have neither offered (for the most part) the capacity for providing effective explanations to other questions regarding the more complex aspects of human color experience nor the human relationship with color, especially when moving into the areas of human behavior, psychological responses to color and color selection. In this regards and during the last half of the twentieth century, the social sciences have engaged in studies regarding the influences of color on humans (and other living entities). The resulting theories, rather than trying to explain the origins of color, focus on the agency of light over human beings and their living spaces. This group acknowledges the existence of intrinsic properties of color that can be used to promote or affect human welfare, both psychologically and physically. This area also involves the study of aesthetic values and cultural responses of color. More recently, marketing and advertising have embedded many of these empirical concepts into their strategic policies and campaigns.

Reading visual information is a socially-constructive experience, where culture defines the codes of interpretation. Since we cannot see or feel the color experiences of others, social groups may construct and interpret the Other within their own visual language. We must remember that color is after all an individual experience, and the use and values given to those color experiences are socially created. In this context, it is important to understand that these developments, especially those referring to the functionality of color as a marketing tool, have been centered on the experience of the West,

and are inevitably geographically centered in the European experience. As a rule, these color theories have not been presented as Eurocentric interpretations but rather as an all-inclusive universal set of color laws. Ironically, when these color theories try to refer to marginal, ‘non-centered’ groups, such theories tend to abandon the ‘objective’ scientific mode usually employed in such endeavors for one that is more emotionally based than rationally based.

However, this migration toward an emotionally-based approach is never considered to be a diminishment of its presumed authority as an objective science. In other words, color theory has been used as a basis to reinforce political and social inequities not just by the assumption of its universality, but also by reproducing discourses of otherness that qualify people and communities base on their appreciation and application of color. The next section will explore, how color theory has been ‘tinted’ with political prejudices toward those in the ‘periphery.’

### **United States: Color Preferences and Cars Colors.**

As will be explored in Chapter IV, Contextualizing Lowriders, automobiles are very important and unique objects within the United States, not just in economical and transportation terms, but also in the construction of concepts such as citizenship, progress, civility, and overall, as central objects for American modernism. This section will explore the research done in regard to color preference of and car color for Americans, in order to set

the background for lowriders color customizations and understand their relevance for the study of color-object-culture in design.

One of the first questions that comes to mind is how can color preferences be mapped in a nation as diverse and vast as the United States, especially since color is primarily a personal and individual experience. I contend that any effort to reduce this type of color to fixed number is extremely problematic. However, some studies have shown recurring patterns and similarities among particular groups, inferring the collective nature of color preferences. However and as explained before, we cannot assume, define, or develop fixed conclusions in terms of color, without encountering the danger of falling into narrow generalizations. In this case, I would prefer to discuss temporal trends and, more importantly, levels of provability in preferences. As Jill Morton, CEO of *Colorcom*, (a Honolulu-based consulting firm with offices in several capitals around the world) argues “the bottom line is that color preferences are really about demographics... and it’s not a fixed situation either, because our color preferences change over time” (Color by Number, p 30). As the manager of the Global Color Database that has gathered information about color preferences for more than 60,000 people worldwide since 1997, Morton is very cautious regarding generalizing about shades of color. As she explains, “I hate it when people make big statements about a color like blue, when light blue and dark blue are completely different” (Slatalla, para. 22). As she explains, aspects such as light, texture, reflection, location, and experience

heavily define and influence color perception, in a way that dark blue can be perceived as a lighter blue in different circumstances, or when presented next to other colors.

Nevertheless, our caution about color should not force us to discard several studies that have shown similarities and trends in color preferences. On the contrary, these studies can help us to understand the complex arguments around color in the United States. The first category to explore is gender. In this regard, color preferences based on gender are neither clear nor well defined. There is no confirmed consensus about how gender may define color preferences; however, it appears that these differences are affected greatly by age variations (Eysenck, 1941; Guilford 1959) and socialization. On one side, gender color variations have been linked to biological differences, for example by the fact that men are more likely to experience color blindness than women, as shown in a Howard Hughes Medical Institute study from 2006. They found that around 7 percent of American male population is affected from some kind of color deficiency, while only 0.4 percent of the female population surveyed suffered from these conditions. The argument here is that because male deficiencies, they are more likely to select color with high and clear saturations, while women may choose less saturation hues toward more soft colors. However, the numbers are not significant to validate this argument across male/female groups.

Gender colors preferences have been also linked to the effects of socialization, since girls and boys, from their earliest ages, are conditioned

socially to particular color palette. These boy or girl colors are reinforced over time by decors, fashion, and social associations to masculinity and femininity. As Kathy Lamanchusa, a color strategist for several Top 500 Companies explains, these differences have changed in recent years and have been shown to be flexible. Today, as more complex and diverse color patterns are available, children grow up with greater color exposure and more color options from which to choose. As Lamanchusa mentions, today's American children in general have access to multiple array of colors and visual stimulants. For example, Crayola Crayons presently offers more than 120 different colors, and an average 'tween' (8-12 years old) plays between 10-18 hours of video games a week, in addition to their Internet access and virtual transnational mobility. All these factors are affecting gender color gaps.

Richard Brandt, Executive Creative Director of Landor Associates, a branding firm in San Francisco, believes "that the old paradigm of girls are girls and boys are boys is being replaced by much crossover in terms of color" (Demographics, p. 34) in a way that color per color alone is not the only element that may define male/female chromatic preferences, but rather, the social context and the gender associations linked to object. Brandt says, "you can't put a GI Joe in pink. But can Diesel do pink men's clothing? Absolutely" (Demographics, p 33). As he explains, color association with particular objects may vary as long as the core links with social values remain. It may be that a plain pink t-shirt is acceptable for a man, as a

transitional accessory but a GI Joe is not approved. This happens because GI Joes have strong ties as a boy/war/soldier toy, with social associations to masculinity and patriarchal models of nationalism. Color transgression in a simple plain T-shirt may be acceptable, but those transgressions may not be approved in other types of t-shirts. In other words, color transgressions are linked to the particularities of each object. In the case of the United States, colors work as depositories of gender values. The color associated to those values may change, but the core values are more stable. The objects, the form of the object, the function, are all active components that work together in a network of social significations associated to color.

Another important factor in color perception in the United States is age. As Lamanchusa explains, age is per se a defining factor precisely because our vision decreases and changes, as we get old. In this regard, the preference for light colors in older generations has been associated to a visibility factor, since dark colors become harder to read. For example, in the United States, “seniors are almost four times as likely as teenagers to prefer sky blue” (Demographics, p 34) — while the same survey shows that Navy blue, a darker tone of blue, is more popular with teens. The argument here is that a natural decrease of vision is compensated by a preference for brighter color; however, no studies have been conducted to corroborate this statement scientifically.

Lamanchusa further argues that what is relevant is that these social and age differences create unique and particular *color generations*, where

members of a particular age range may share some similarities with their peers in regard to color preferences and chromatic trends. For her, each generation has its own color history, which is defined by an array of historical events that build their color visual consciousness (Demographics, p. 34). In other words, many of our personal relations with color have been defined by particular experiences that happen collectively but which ultimately affect us at the personal level. Therefore, each generation shares not only a particular age-type of music or clothes, etc., but it also shares unique experiences associated with colors. These color generations get their colors re-enforced by comics, TV series, natural catastrophes, heroic events, and regional activities, climate, etc. Following this model, it can be seen that the experiences of discrimination and subjugation may have defined a unique chromatic history in the Chicana/o community and it is necessary to explore the genealogy of Chicana/o color.

As argued before, gender chromatic preferences cannot be always predicted, as they can change over time if the social values associated with them change. Leatrice Eiseman (2002), director of the Pantone Color Institute argues that in the United States, “ten years ago, it was considered hard to sell purple to males. It was a female color. But graphic and fashion designer have thrown away the notebook. Today, a guy will go out and buy a purple fleece jacket” (Demographics, p. 33). The question here is to which United States is she referring, since as a nation the United States is a profoundly heterogeneous and diverse community. Nevertheless, it is

interesting to note that particular colors are linked to specific gender with such certainty. Certainly, the idea that males and females have individual color preferences have motivated color researchers and marketers to try to find what are the current trends in order to keep the market active. In this case, color is defined as an *added value* to commodities. In addition, color has been used as a tool to revitalize products with minimal variations in their production. This is well recorded in the case of car obsolescence, where the introduction of new car models consistently without serious car improvements is meant to promote a regular replacement of cars by users. Other recent examples can be found in products such as Yoo-hoo and Heinz. In the first one, Yoo-hoo, a chocolate beverage, achieved greater sales acceptance after the bottle's colors and graphics were changed to yellow in 1999. In the case of Heinz, the tomato sauce producer, it increased its sales by 14 percent in 2001 just by changing the color of the Ketchup sauce from red to a new 'funky purple.'

For design, the color of a car represents an important factor aesthetically, technologically, emotionally, and economically. It may express customer preferences, and affect their overall satisfaction as well as the cost of production. Car color as a driving factor in customer preferences and car sales is a widely accepted idea. However, it is still necessary to understand customer preferences as defined by the technology available at any given time and not solely by the user him/herself. Yet, Jane E. Harrington, PPG manager and color coating specialist, argues that car manufacturers today



have understood that color can be used to “define and differentiate” their brand and the cars associated to their company. She explains how, “the palette of colors being developed for the automotive market is clearly being influenced by culture, nature, fashion, movies, media, electronics and many [other] consumer products” (para. 7). This aspect is particularly important for those interested in design and culture, because it clearly specifies how car colors should not be studied or interpreted in isolation from the rest of cultural products generated by society. Rather, it needs to be considered holistically as part of a vast network of objects and social significations that have been associated to those colors. This is why it is important for designers to contextualize car color within the car industry experience, and the discourses associated to taste, modernity, power, masculinity, etc., as they frame our social references around color. As previously explained, when studying color politics, each color comes with a set of assumptions, and ‘user manual’ to reading them, in what Judith Butler would call speech “citations” (Butler, 33). Color exists within a system, a social system of knowledge that frames individual relationships with them. People always choose colors in context and never in isolation.

Another factor to study is the emotional and psychological impact of color in cars. Several studies have tried to understand how color affects the perception of the driver, or even if car color can affect their safety. For example, in December 2003, the *British Medical Journal* published the results of a study performed by the University of Auckland, New Zealand. This study

analyzed the frequency of accidents between April 1998 and June 1999 in New Zealand as they may relate to the car's color. The researchers found that drivers of brown color cars are more likely to suffer serious injuries as a consequence of car related accidents. Black and green cars followed this pattern of accidents, as second and third place respectively. Interestingly, on the other side of the spectrum, owners of silver cars were "about 50% less likely to be involved in a crash resulting in serious injury than white cars" (p. 1455). The researchers did not explain why those variations took place, for example, or if there were any difference in lighting during those accidents, or if the weather affected the visual perception of the drivers. They did not describe the influence of other factors such as age, driving experience, and the presence of alcohol, or drugs. However, it introduces some interesting observations, especially when considering several urban legends about the color of cars.

Following this line of research, another related study was performed in Spain during 2002. The research team wanted to determine if the color of a car has any influence in the involvement of the car in passive collisions. In other words, is the car color a determinate factor in accidents where the driver of a car was not responsible for the collision? Furthermore, are some cars more likely than others to be hit by another car, just because of the car color? In this study, the researchers found out that light colored cars (white, cream, light grey) are less likely to be involved in a passive collision (Lardelli-Claret, 2002, p. 727), while dark, and black color cars have slightly higher

chances of being hit by another car. As the researchers explained, the influence of the car's color can be the result of other factors such as the weather and the environmental conditions at the time of collision. As they explained, the change of these conditions has a direct effect in the driver perception of color, "for example, at twilight and at night, drivers turn on the headlights, reducing the effect of color on visibility" (p. 723). These other changes in the visual perception of color were not studied, however, as a result of their findings, the researchers recommended the enforcement of the use of light colors, such as white and yellow, in emergency and cars for safety and special needs, as in the case of school busses, ambulances, fire trucks, and patrol cars.

Other studies (Adair, 1990; Healey, 1996; Peige, 2006) have tried to connect the incidence of traffic tickets with the color of the cars; however, the results did not substantiate the arguments that some cars just by their color are more likely to get stopped or ticketed by traffic enforcement officials. As shown by the researchers, the car color did not influence the officer's perception, his/her decision, or the behavior of the driver. Neither were the owners of a particular car color found to be the recipients of more tickets overall. In other words, it was not the car color that mattered, but the manner in which the car was driven had a greater impact. Other factors, such as driving experience, age, race and stress levels were found to be more important in the issuing of tickets than the color of the car.

It is important to clarify that even when color as a safety-defining cause has not been clarified, color remains a very important factor for the marketing and acquisition of cars. For example, in a study relating color and car purchase, DuPont (1992), as the leading provider of car paint, found that 27 percent of customers will walk out of a car dealership if they do not find the color of the car they want. Furthermore, as Karen Surcina, a DuPont engineer for their Color Marketing and Technology Department explained, the same test was performed again in 1997 and the percentage when up by 12 points, for a total of 39 percent of people walking out if the car color you want is not there.

Since color is so important for car buyers, DuPont decided to study in detail customers' preferences, as they affect their success in the market. DuPont developed a survey to study changes and trends in car color, globally and regionally, in order to get accurate information to car manufacturers about users color preferences and to help automakers to do changes as the market changed. The most recent of those reports, the 58<sup>th</sup> DuPont Global Automotive Color Popularity Report from 2010, showed silver as the worldwide most popular car color (26%). It is followed very close by black (24%) in a second place, and a tied third place between white and grey (both with 16%). As the report explains these color preferences are not constant; they vary by regions. For example, in the United States, white/white pearl has been the leading color for the last four years with a 21% of popularity, followed very closely by black (18%) and silver (17%). A very similar

distribution of the top four colors is found in Mexico, and the rest of Latin America, but with a different preferential order, where silver leads, and black follows. DuPont's findings corroborate the results from PPG Industries, another Industrial coating company, located in Pittsburgh, which found the same color preferences in the United States.

In addition to rank color preferences, DuPont, which operates in more than 90 countries, was interested in compiling global and international trends by themes. They named four themes: *Spirit*, *Couture*, *Ambition*, and *Vision*. These four themes are based on income, demographics, innovation motivations, social change desires, generation, etc., and have been organized to give designers a better understanding of the relationships between social context and the preference for car-color, in a way that unify users across common color patterns. For example, under the theme of *Spirit* colors, we can find those colors that are "most suited for luxury brands" where "dark and rich [colors] evoke high-class appeal" (DuPont, para. 23). On the contrary, those colors on the *Ambition* category include colors that have been defined as "most influenced by nature and the trend toward more ecologically friendly vehicles" (para. 25) without more explanation. Finally, the *Vision* collection is defined by colors that "are best suited for consumers that want their vehicles to be seen on the road" (para. 26), which includes sport cars and brand image cars. What is not clear is how DuPont arrived at making these themed color associations. The methodology used to determine these correlations is never explained; neither, for that matter, is their process

of evaluation or confirmation of color preference. It remains an unclear area. Without an explanation of the network of social relationships that sustains these color preferences, it is difficult to truly understand how historical, economical, and cultural preferences are constructed and changed, especially because car customers, particularly those from the third world, have little influence in the car color available for them. It may be that those preferences respond to other reasons, such as car manufacturers prices or technology viability in the creation of colors. Since the report does not address these methodological questions, DuPont actually contributes *more* mystery to the process humans employ with regard to choosing color in products.

Based on a series of interviews conducted by Lou Ann Hammond, a former Vice President and chairwoman for the Western Automotive Journalists (WAJ), on the topic of car color with several car designers and executives, it appears that the selection process for defining car colors still remains an unclear science. Each car manufacturer interviewed described a different process for the selection of color, and this process is very much tied to the design team's specific interpretation of what is appropriate for the car, with minimal input from the customers. For example, Christopher Webb, Senior Creative Designer for color and trend at General Motors (GM) North America explains that in their case,

The designers meet with three different paint houses, we go to fashion shows, we read magazines such as the Trend Union, a bi-annual trend forecasting book that shapes colors and lifestyles for seasons ahead.

We design with the brand in mind, so that the name of the color defines the product. A couple of examples for the Hummer would be Grenade green and desert sand. (Hammond, 2007, para. 4)

In the case of GM, the process used in the selection of color is still tied very much to the personal interpretation of color trends by the designer and to the branding of the product. This process of color selection is not very different from what other car manufactures are doing. For instance, John Krafcik, Vice President of Product Planning & Strategic Planning for Hyundai Motor America, explained the development of the Hyundai's Elantra. The company understood that its target market was constituted by customers in their mid-to-late 40's, who "went to college listening to Purple Rain, by Prince. Song names cannot be copyrighted, so when Hyundai decided to bring the Elantra out in a purple, it was an easy decision" (para. 9). This may have been an easy decision for the design team, but the reasoning to justify and guarantee a positive response can be troubling, since it is based only in the assumption that customers will read purple and feel moved to buy the car because it reminded them of Prince's song Purple Rain. Furthermore, what if during the years that followed Prince's hit, the same customers have developed negative associations to that particular color? What if, "Purple Rain" is interpreted with apocalyptic events, or what if the user dislikes the personal life of Prince, the singer?

In addition, Krafcik explains how Hyundai defines unique color palettes for each car, specifying their characteristics and names based on

their target customers and the image they want to impart for the car. As he said, the car model “Azera is purchased by folks in their early 50s, so the [color’s] names, such as Aubergine [a dark purple], reflect a more mature audience. An orange Azera or minivan would be a real risk” for that particular market. Again, the connections are not clear. However, an important point is presented here by car manufactures, the fact that customers’ color perception and satisfaction is not defined simply by the color hue/tone, but also by the name assigned to that color, in a way that even the same color can be perceived differently by changing its name. This point is particularly important because it reinforces again the high value associated to color by society and by the process of the semiotics of color. For example, Nissan USA’s interior design manager, Francois Farion, describes how white, silver, and black are what he calls “strategic” “deadlocked” colors, which everyone in the car industry must use. For him, it is precisely because of social constructions, that “certain colors you won’t see on some Nissan vehicles, such as a black minivan. And there are certain names, such as when we named a grey Xterra color hippo; that was not a good name. We renamed the color and it is now the best selling color of the Xterra” (para. 7). In all of these examples, it is not clear what exact process has been used to assign colors, or to evaluate the efficiency of those color associations. It may be, that because of the economic impact of this information, that car companies keep it secret to maintain control over the process as a way of protecting themselves from the competition.



A first glitch on a probably more accurate description to the real process used by car manufacturers can be found in the explanation given by Teresa Spafford, lead designer of Color and Trim for Mazda North American Operations. As she says, Mazda does extensive tests in a least four different continents just to ensure the feasibility of a color before they release it into the market. Spafford explains,

We break out the [focus market] groups into two groups; one group is under 35-years old, the other, over 35-years old. Mazda has found out that people in their focus groups under 35 think sporty colors are dark blue or dark black. Also, neutral is more sporty to younger kids than vibrant colors. The focus group over 36 years old thinks of sportier colors as yellow or orange. Both groups think the universal sporty color is red, or a variant of red. It's important to note that many parents pick out the cars for their college kids, but the kids pick the color. (para. 12)

Several points in Spafford's argument have interesting applicability for this research, certainly the relationships between users who have emotional ties between color and objects, but also about the influence of other individuals, or power structures, such as parents or friends, in the purchase decisions of a car. Therefore, the experience of parents with particular colors, as well as their assumptions about color-and-safety can be crucial to define the success of one color over other in the market. To what degree a parent influences the decision making of a teenager still needs to be

explored, but clearly, color is an important component in the binary of form-function for the market.

Finally, it appears car manufactures and car color developers are devoting some attention to the work done and colors employed by car customizing groups, such as hot-rod and lowriders. As Christopher Webb explains, General Motors in North America is trying to be more “culturally aware and we try to reflect this in the colors. The exterior car colors have many more pigments in them than previous colors and many have movement or hue shifting qualities,” as a result, he explains, there is a global trend toward color “customization” (para. 4). Karen Surcina, one of DuPont’s color marketing and technology engineers, also shares this assessment. Surcina says, “the trend for the future is chromatic colors and color travelers. We see gray now, but soon gray will include the infusion of blue or green, so there is a hint of color traveling through the gray, which adds interest to the color” (para. 15). Ironically, this fashion for color traveling is hardly new; it has been popular in lowriders and hot rods for quite sometime already. Again, the works in the peripheries of the markets are remarketed and expropriated for mainstream, as *added value*, and perhaps as elements to reinforce car obsolescence. After years of *vernacular* experimentation in color and surface treatments, lowrider auto shops and painters may see their favorites inventions mass-produced. The question is, what will be the effect in their work, and the little auto-shops, and painters? Would the popularization of traveling-color treatments change how mainstream markets appreciate and

approach low/riders? Would the industry, recognize where those new colors come from?

### **The Politics of Color**

“It was the Spaniards who gave the world the notion that an aristocrat's blood is not red but blue... Sangre azul, blue blood, was thus a euphemism for being a white man—Spain's own particular reminder that the refined footsteps of the aristocracy through history carry the rather less refined spoor of racism” (Robert Lacey, 1983, *Aristocrats*. p. 67).

As discussed before, color can assume varied meanings depending upon the context. So far, we have explored color only from the aesthetic point of view, but the same term can also be loaded with heavy social meanings tied to the politics of ethnic differentiations, class, and nationality. We may want to believe that those two meanings, aesthetic and racial, can be separated. On the contrary, both significations are intrinsically interconnected. In this section, I will not discuss the politics behind the study of the origins and mechanics of color. However, we should question the implications behind controlling the knowledge of color reproduction. Here, I want to focus on examining how variations of skin pigmentation have been tied to color use and color preferences in order to create categories of beings. In other words, how is that color has been used to legitimate and validate the (de)valorization of racial and ethnic groups, and untimely to even create

those groups/categories? In addition, I will discuss how is that color is regulated and policed in our society by assumptions about deviancy, color pathologies, and taste.

During the Enlightenment, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German philosopher, theorist, and poet of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries argued that “men in state of nature... [as well as] uncivilized nations and children, have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness” (Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 55). Here, Goethe has expressed a long established Western sentiment about the relationship between color preferences and the notions of civilization and reason. Goethe’s notion of color must be analyzed also within the context of a European trying to grapple with the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of those colonized. Keeping in mind that by the time of Goethe’s publication, the Age of Discovery had just ended, and Europe had already expansively settled its political, cultural, economical dominium to the new territories of America, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.

The influx of resources, raw materials, and population growth catapulted the Industrial Revolution. Europe left mercantilist society to embrace a new economic experiment (Capitalist) that will establish modern economic growth patterns. Simultaneously, during this period the colonies start to resist and revolt resulting in emergence of a new independence movement and consolidating the European geopolitics in terms of center and peripheral relationships.

Within this context, Goethe defined a colored triptych of beings, comprised of “men in State of nature,” “uncivilized nations” and “civilized men,” (where logically Goethe positioned himself). The creation of these ‘natural’ categories, during this period proved to be imperative for Europe in the established of hierarchical ‘natural’ rules meant to justify the inequities perpetuated in the new socioeconomic system. Color became a visual and readily identifiable venue to solidify those inequities. This triptych set the landscape among the savage, the new independent colonies as nations, and the civilized/tasteful nations of the industrial world.

Goethe’s observations ratified and consolidated an imaginary geochromatic world, where bright colors exemplify the deviant, or the savage nature of non-western subjects. As Michael Taussig (2009), the famous late twentieth-century anthropologist explains, “Western fantasies about non-Western people, [are] fantasies that effectively divided the world into chromophobes and chromophiliacs... Color for the West became attached to colored people or their equivalents” (p. 16). In this case, otherness could be constructed by the managing of color. Therefore, color austerity could be associated with the civilized and the human, and perhaps even a clearly defined last step in the progression of humanity. Here, I am not implying that otherness is constructed merely by discourses on color, but instead aesthetics becomes a ground to reinforce otherness and the resulting subjugation. Certainly, various groups and cultures may have different preferences, approaches, and color patterns, which largely have been defined

by historical and environmental realities. However, what we see here is more than just the acknowledgement of these color differences, but rather, the creation of set of valorizations about these groups, in a way that some groups are defined as 'better' than others. As explored, these color assumptions about the Other as a chromo-savage are not limited to the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. On the contrary, such color assumptions continue today, as will be observed when we explore how Chicana/o Latinos, and other groups are represented, characterized, stereotyped, judged, or erotized based on their color preference or use.

Furthermore, it is important to notice how Goethe employs the term "children" to refer to a particular type of beings that have not yet (in Goethe's estimation) achieved full reason, as some kind of proto-humans. This status as undeveloped-human is crucial to the effort of understanding the relationship that northern and central Europe has developed in relation to their Mediterranean neighbors, such as Italy and Spain (most likely not coincidentally predominantly Catholic states). This is significant because that by the time of the publication of Goethe's book, Germany had already experienced over 300 years of Luther/Calvin reform. In this instance, such reform can be interpreted as a particular intellectual trajectory that took a set of conservative Protestant ethic values (heavily rooted in the concepts of redemption by self-mortification, efficient hard work, and austerity) and formulated them into a particular way to relate aesthetically. This can be seen in what Daniel T. Jenkins (1988) typifies as an aesthetic defined by "the

virtues of simplicity, sobriety and measure" (p. 153). Certainly, it is here that we discover the roots of the austere modernism "chromophobia" (Taussig, 12) where bright colors are generally construed as superfluous and inherently suspicious and deceptive. Subsequent to Goethe's theory, bright colors are perceived as synonymous with a primitive stage of life or as expressions of uncontrolled desires or passions.

This self-imposed European chromo morality sets in place to what Taussig clearly exposes as "the polluting and transgressive quality of bright color[s]" (p.12). However, I contend that the rejection of bright colors further creates an internal conflict, a tension, a crisis between what is morally accepted, and the desire for the exotic Other. In other words, color is irresistible and deploys a game of rejecting and desiring the Other. Therefore, the policing of color set Europe into an enterprise of color conquest, or a safari for color, in a way the 'non-Westerners' are simultaneously rejected and idealized or exoticized. For Edward Said (1978), in his book *Orientalism*, western understanding and assumptions about Arabo-Islamic people and the Middle East in general have been defined by the construction and perpetuation of a series of ideological and epistemological myths about them. Western inaccuracies and prejudices against the Middle East, unified under *Orientalism*, represent for Said, "a cultural apparatus... [Which] is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge" (p. 204). For him, the "Occident" creates a set of knowledge about Eastern societies, as a homogeneous culture that is in opposition, and against Western values. One

of the instruments of Orientalism, is that of always define the Other as an exotic being, uncivilized, and ruled by instinct and not reason. As said notes, the discourses of Orientalism are perpetuated in literary texts, tourist guides, journalist chronologies, and paints, about the Middle East. Said's work on Orientalism, have been used to explain the West's relationship not just with the Middle East but other cultural groups as well.

In the context of Orientalism, possessing or conquering the Other means, for the West also to control and acquire their color palette, without being fundamentally defined by them. Bright colors became commoditized and fetishized in a way that these palettes become depositories of an almost primal desire for the pure and untouchable spirit of those "Men in state of nature." This is exemplified for what Vincent van Gogh called his desire to master the "savage combination of incongruous tones." This notion allows Francois Delamare and Bernard Guineau (2000) to argue in their recent book, *Colors: The Story of Dyes and Pigments*, that the "rarest, most precious colors have always been imported from exotic places" (p.119). This exemplifies how it is that even today bright colors are still attached to significations of the exotic, the rare, the Other.

The elementally intimate relationship between color and power is not limited to sentiments of (de)valorization and nostalgic yearnings for the Other, but it is also related to the superlative value ascribed to particular colors, or color combinations, to symbolize such powerful entities as state power and sovereignty, for example. In this case, certain colors are loaded



with social significations to perpetuate collective imaginations and myths in order to create a sense of state unity and cohesion. This is evident in those colors used in national emblems and flags. For example, in the early beginnings of the United States, Charles Thompson, Secretary of the then Continental Congress was asked to design the National Seal. In June 20, 1782, while reporting to the Congress in regard to the new Seal, he stated, "the colours of the pales are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness & valour, and Blue, the color of the Chief signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice" ("Our Flag," 1998, p 41). Note here how, each color is constructed around socially-defined values, but also how the state presents itself as a male state, clearly assigning its gender-based boundaries. Therefore, color also becomes a visible medium to signify gender-based expectations for performance and conformability within the State. In a tacit evolutionary metaphor, Thompson moves by contrast from the white as signifier of purity, innocence, and possibly feminine weakness, into the realm of blue, which will signify perseverance, force, and male dominium, "as the color of the Chief."

Once, those patriotic and gender significations have been created and internalized as common sense of the state and state inhabitants, any transgressions to those codes become socially punishable. For example, in the United States, blue is associated with boys, and pink with girls. In a wedding, only the bride can wear a white dress, and in a funeral, black is expected. Each culture will have different social rules; however, in the

construction of a state, the perpetuation of those color codes is perceived and presented as imperative for the very existence and cohesion of the state.

In the United States, the colors of certain neighborhoods are regulated by social rules. For example, Home Owner Associations (HOA) often define and enforce what is aesthetically correct and appropriate to ensure civility and (apparently) to maintain house values. Color, in this case, is presented as a factor not only needed to maintain the value of a house (and hence those in its immediate community), but also to define ethnic boundaries within a city. Later on, we will explore a unique case involving a dispute between a Latina writer and her neighborhood's HOA regarding the 'non-standard' color she chose for her house. As we will discover in this particular case study, many of the elements such as race, nationalism, and the exotic Other will converge in relationship to the tension between an imaginary all-Anglo American West and the presence of the Latino community.

Moreover, I contend that color also affects the world of academia in notably particular ways. I am not referring here to color, as synonymous to race/ethnicity, in terms of the disproportionately small presence of minority researchers, and designers, but rather to the notion that, and as Taussig argues, "truth... comes in black and white for our [western] philosophers" (Taussig, p 27). In other words, Western chromophobia has been imbued with notions spawned from the Enlightenment regarding objectivity and reason, especially in the manner in which bright colors are perceived as symptoms of lesser critical rigor and emotional partiality. As an example

taken from academia, positivism and its attendant false notion that objectivity coalesce in the idea that a monochromatic black/white scaled environment are purportedly more conducive to the discovery of an impartial truth. Certainly one can find scholars who have decorated their academic offices with bright colors, but there is the assumption that these spaces are artistic, exceptional, and not representative of the norm in their academic work. Interestingly, in many cases, these bright office colors are balanced by a rigorous use of modernist furniture and minimalistic decoration in order to control the overall visual impact of the room. Even printed material, such as the established protocols for issuing this dissertation, is based on rigid monochromatic guidelines, as if an abundance of color would somehow lessen the academic rigor of its content.

The association of bright colors with categories such as folk, vernacular, or kitsch represents an important aspect of the process of epistemological subjugation experienced by 'Othered' communities. Color and the managing of color becomes an important element to reinforce the centrality of Europe, and the subjugated status of the rest. I argue that, therefore, every time subaltern's visual productions are framed under exclusionary and fixed aesthetic categories as *kitsch*, *vernacular* or *folk* (or exotic) that the current structures of power are reinforced. After all, such categorizations denigrate subaltern knowledge-productions as naïve, inferior, and/or peripheral in reference to more muted European models. These terms have the power of erasure, since it utterly disregards the

precept that all cultures are equally important, and that each one has its own legitimate historical basis. Here the Other as vernacular, or folk, is always conceptualized as outside the realms of taste or 'valid' aesthetic production. In a clearly colonial approach of the center and the periphery, the bright colors of the Other are technically 'approved,' but only in the context of the exotic, the rare, and the sensual. For example, one of the myths frequently used is that non-Western communities do not adhere to a rational scientific method (positivism) in defining their aesthetic interventions. The category of folk is presented antithetically to modernity, one that serves to reinforce the erroneous and culturally-biased idea of the Other as primitive and intrinsically less valuable or desirable — tantamount to constituting as a lesser state of being.

I believe that the creation of otherness as a category serves to reinforce and perpetuate an unequal system of epistemic visual hegemony, one that favors European visual and aesthetic values, and at the same time, one that positions European experience as central to understanding and providing sense to any Other visual epistemologies. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2004) explains, the European's logic is based on the notion of "thinking about epistemology only in reference to the achievements of the Western world" (p 35). Visual knowledge is conceptualized only as a Western product, always in reference to the Western experience and always termed in positivist terms. Furthermore, for Walter Mignolo, it is because of the nature of the colonial project that the West *must* reject any epistemic alternative,

while simultaneously insuring the imposition of the colonizer's singular basis of knowledge as the only valid point of departure and as the sole cohesive element. In other words, in the West, cohesion is visualized by the implementation of a homogeneous chromatic project. Therefore, the policing and regulation of color can be interpreted as a tool to ensure Western hegemonic control. As long as there is a fixed color palette that is perceived as more 'civilized' than all others, a system of chromo-inequity is in place. Once the colonizer's color palette has been normalized, and its self-anointed superiority internalized, 'bright color' productions will be perceived as inferior and will never achieve the standards of civilized people. In the best cases, these bright cultural productions are defined as curiosities, as sources of nostalgic primal knowledge, or as examples of the exotic. As Taussig (2009) explains, "habits come and go, maybe, but are pretty resistant to change. To confront a habit such as chromophobia, extending maybe over a millennium, despite fundamental social, political, technological, and economic changes over that time, is to confront a very special habit indeed" (p. 12). In my opinion, the first task for those performing color-based research is to question and negate the assumption that they can be completely objective, or *chromo value-neutral* researchers. On the contrary, they must, (as much as possible) be reflective about their own color cultural histories and biases. With that in mind, they should be cognizant of the multiple arrays of color paradigms and preferences outside of their 'common color sense.' Further, they should avoid making value assumptions or

connections about the superlative status of one color over another, thereby averting engaging in preferential cultural color assumptions as well as ideas/laws around color universalisms.

In the realm of design, one tendency may be to believe that these discourses on color and race may be irrelevant or that they pertain only to the social sciences. This happens, in part, because those in design have been generally conditioned to believe that the issues such as the race, hegemony, and even culture are located outside the designer's realm. This mindset (that perceived issues related to race do not pertain to the field of design) allows for aesthetic Eurocentric approaches to be reproduced unquestioned and unaltered, almost as if they were natural laws. This is exacerbated by the very limited diversity of the design body. Here, in the United States, for example, there is a clearly racial distinction between the access to a four-year college education and a community college, which limits the presence of minorities in our design field and (as will be discussed following), reduces the epistemological diversity in the field.

However, design's epistemic deficiencies are not limited to issues of access. For example, I remember a telling incident that occurred when I started my industrial design undergraduate education. On the very first day of class, the director of our school asked for a show of hands to reflect who had attended a private high school and who graduated from a public institution. He explained that those coming from public education were already at a disadvantage from their other private educated peers. As he

explained, publically educated students come with a 'visual handicap' defined by their poor visual training. Furthermore, the director implied that those coming from public school might never be able to overcome their early deficiencies, even after their formal college education and will carry their 'handicap' in to the work place. Most likely, he intended to stimulate everyone to work hard. However, the full import of his discourse is particularly relevant in this consideration of the relationship between race and access to education in general. I did not believe him. Ironically, I learned later that the director himself came from a very underprivileged family, and had a public education — in a clear contradiction to his early arguments. Nevertheless, as my education proceeded, I observed several classmates struggling to prove their worthiness and rightness to be designers. In this case, social class was used overtly to create a category of being with expressly stated repercussions for the validation of one particular standard of aesthetic values and visual decision-making. The implication here was that if you were one of those underprivileged high school students, you might well unwittingly perpetuate an 'intrinsically' poor aesthetic. Furthermore, privileged students by default would perform better visual assessments. By encouraging one group over another, design education stirred/directed design production and particular epistemologies of taste for several years. The issue is not only about equal access to education, but also about equal access to visual knowledge, or what I call epistemological visual and taste equality.

At this juncture, I would like to explain, how racial/class-misconceptions still relate to color today. Carlton Wagner (the director and founder of the Wagner Institute for Color Research in Santa Barbara, California) defined eight parameters to understand the color preferences of people. In his work as an interior designer and clinical psychologist, Wagner argued that color preferences develop primarily as a result of socialization and the environment. For him, biological make-up constitutes the basis, the foundation, upon which color awareness is built. He argued that color experiences, or color history, as well as our geography, vegetation, climate, and light accessibility of a place have a decided impact in our color preferences. He also explains that other aspects such as cultural and regional distinctions play an important role in creating a sense of familiarity and developing a chromo correlation to objects and practices. However, he does not stop here as he also includes income, social status, and education as essential factors in the construction of individual and cultural color make-up. He argues that in homogeneous societies, more than any other factors, income, *sophistication*, and education may in fact be pivotal in what distinguishes individual color preferences.

Referring to Wagner's theories, Jeanne Kopacz (2004) explains in her book, *Color in Three-Dimensional Design*, that as a "person becomes more educated, is exposed to more culture, and has greater financial resources, his or her color preferences change. More colors become acceptable, and we appreciate a greater number of color combinations" (101). Clearly, Wagner



and Kopacz are still advancing arguments similar to those used by Goethe; in this case, “savage” men are created by their inaccessibility to education or economic resources. It is interesting to notice the manner in which Kopacs positions herself (and the reader), by using the pronoun *we* as one of those with *more culture* and therefore positioned to make an *accurate* assessment about the taste of others. The rhetoric here is one of meritocracy, where ascending in social class also implies the notion of improving one’s humanness and color sensibility. In this value-laden and constructed view, culture is a subject that is understood as a very particular and highly-defined entity associated with *High Culture* and Eurocentric values of beauty as its definitional underpinnings.

Furthermore, Kopacz argues that color preferences are not only linked to economic status, but to the intelligence of the individual. As she said, an individual “with less life experience or lower financial means may find fewer hues attractive than the individual with greater means, more education, higher intelligence, and broader life experiences” (102). From this point in design scholarship, the connection between color-class-intelligence has been linked together, just as Goethe did before by arguing against *uncivilized* people and children. As can be seen here, the problem is the assumption that an unprivileged individual not only has a constrained chromo-gallery from which to choose, but that he/she is incapable, by limited intelligence, to ever achieve the taste of the upper classes, as if those privileges groups hold the untimely aesthetic taste.

In an attempt to validate her argument, Kopacz explains that color-preferences are linked to a process of mind abstraction, where using complex colors and combinations imply the highest of mental abilities. In other words, the use of simple (or primary) colors should be linked to simple and primary visual reading. As she further explains, “the more advanced one is in terms of socio-economical development, the more one is drawn to complex colors... [and] more complex colors require some narrative” (102). In this case, narrative is employed to exemplify the process used to construct complex visual discourses around color. Kopacz’s decision to miscorrelate the relationship between the intelligence of an individual and his/her color preference reflects elements from the misleading argument from Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1969) regarding the categorization of cultures based on their language about color and color terms. In the case of Kopacz, color use and color awareness are related to a person, or a group, level of sophistication and development.

The supposition here is that the use of primary colors signifies less visual sophistication, and therefore the more complex a color becomes, more intelligence is required in order to understand, recognize, appreciate, and decode its meaning. On the basis of this argumentation, then, it is obvious that such complex and detailed modes of expression as those used by low-rider color patterns or the Chicana/o Muralist movement in the barrios, exemplify the absurdity of correlating, class, race, and education with intelligence and visual sufficiency. It is clear that just as in the case of Goethe,

Kopacz connects erroneously bright primary colors with primitivism. As she argues, the lower a group is ranked in the social stratification, “the more comfortable they are with simple colors” (102) — hence, locating them in distinct opposition to “more successful individuals [that] are more likely to choose darker values” (102) or complex color patterns.

Furthermore, Kopacz applies Wagner’s concepts of *classifying/declassifying colors* in order to categorize and create color palettes based on economic class distinctions, where some colors are designated to the upper classes and others to the poor. In this final move, color choice becomes emblematic of social elitism. The danger inherent in this approach not only concerns the non-scientific assumptions made about the intelligence of any individual from a certain social position to read (or not to read) a color, and the color choice’s attendant degree of civility to be a member of the ‘good taste’ society, but it also has implications about the validation, exclusion, and subjugation of individuals who make certain color decisions, adhere to selected chromatic values, and their related visual knowledge.

Just as with Goethe, these assumption-laden constructs about color pave the way to the notion that some colors are, by their nature, bad or at least carry negative elements. As Kopacz explains, “a classifying color is one that only a small percent of the population finds appealing, and these individuals are most frequently in higher socioeconomic classes” (102). Curiously, this line of thought actually argues that some colors exist only in selected upper class communities and furthermore that people from the

lower classes lack the ability to “see” them. In many ways, this view allows that some colors achieve mystical values as sacred colors for consumption by privileged communities. The perpetuation of this flawed idealization (about sacred colors existing only in upper classes), allows Kopacz to validate the intrinsically superlative value of the upper classes. In other words, in order to preserve these special and rare colors and to avoid their extinction, it is essential to maintain the current structure of classes, and class subjugation.

On the other hand, as Kopacz explains a “declassifying color is one that most people recognize with familiarity. Such colors communicate concepts of informality, low cost, and access for everyone, [as in the cases of] orange and yellow in full saturation” (102). As we see here, Kopacz uses this hierarchical color matrix to link concepts such as social order, spontaneity, and popularity in distinct opposition to the order and rationality of the upper classes, as well as between bright color and low key colors. Kopacz’s relationships depict the potential chaotic nature of full-saturated colors and lower classes, and consequently the implied need to have an upper class capable of managing society. Here, color justifies the rhetoric of savagery, primitivism, and class division. For Kopacz there is a direct relationship between color and class.

The argument to which I would like to draw attention is not about avoiding the idea that different cultural groups may have variable colors preferences, and therefore assert that society must inspire to a single homogeneous color pattern or to inspire for a color-blind society. Instead, it

should be noted that substantial negative issues arise when color choice differences are used to justify social inequity or to validate the creation of multiple categories that privilege some humans as innately better than others. As will be explored in the next section, these arguments of color deviancy have been used against Latinas/Chicana/os in the United States multiple times demonstrating that the aesthetics of color are intrinsically tied to discourses of skin color, race, and class.

### **A case for a Chicana/o Color Genealogy**

“As the spirit of the gift, color is what sold and continues to sell modernity” (Michael Taussig, 2009, p. 25).

*Tan, tan*

*Quién Es?* [Who is it?]

*La vieja Inez*

*Que quieres?* [What do you want?]

*Quiero Colores* [I want colors]

*Que color quieres?* [What color you want?]

*Quiero... [I want...].* (quoted in Castro, 2001, Chicano Folklore, p 238).

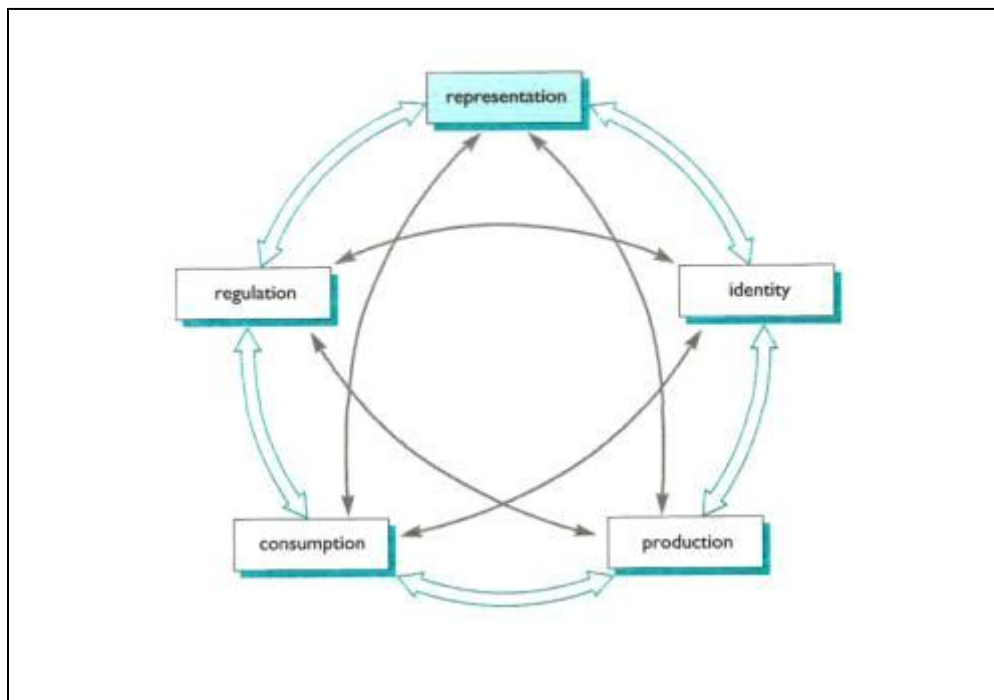
The notion of Chicana/os using color in different ways than mainstream Anglo-American communities in the United States may seem obvious to some, and it has whitely accepted as ‘common sense.’ On many occasions, this argument may have been accepted with little questioning from both sides. However, most arguments about *color* use have not included arguments for race/class and aesthetics simultaneously. For the most part,

both arguments are presented as disparate realities. Ironically, little work has been devoted to Chicana/o use of color as an aesthetic element. Largely, Chicana/o Latinos in the United States have been associated with bright colors without a serious analysis about the historical accuracy of this assumption, or what relation these statements bear in the perpetuation of myths about the exotic/primitive Other. Are Chicana/o bright colors an original product of a distinctive culture or do they result from marketing Chicana/os as exotic Other?

In order to undertake such a complex task, as analyzing color around the Chicana/o Latino community, I would like to use Paul du Gay's Circuit of Culture (see Figure 13) as a model to navigate the multiple elements at play here. He is highly effective in using this model to explore the intricate world of a cultural object, such as the Walkman, in his book *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (2003). His analysis proposes five elements: identity, production, consumption, regulation, and representation. For him, the analysis of any cultural production must embrace these components to ensure a solid understanding of its complexity. This model is particularly useful when referring to Chicana/os and color as it allows us to explore not just how a particular community utilizes color, but also how mainstream approach those color uses, and re/expropriate them.

This dynamic approach aids in the understanding of cultural productions as a whole as other aspects are included, such as the market and the polarities of the trans-generational experience. In the du Gay model, each

one of those components becomes a player in the game of visual cultural awareness, since it affects not only its production but it also illuminates the process of reading and trading visual information. Using his model, color transcends the limited notion of a static aesthetic element, instead becoming a complexly understood and negotiated hybrid of the social relationships that surround it.



*Figure 13. The Circle of Culture as developed by Paul duGay.*

I would like to use the du Gay model as a kind of foreground in order to position a set of issues that surround the particularity of the borderlands as an unique place. It is important to note that du Gay's original model does

not address salient components such as race, class, gender, and hetero-normative narratives. Consequently, each one of his original five elements will be analyzed in such a way as to include the issues of class, race and gender, as these last constituents are too complex to be embraced only through the element of regulation. Here, I prefer to perceive, race and class as gravitating around this circle of culture, as three-dimensional segments that oversee and interconnect all other parameters. Therefore, I prefer to approach du Gay's five parameters not as fixed positions, but rather as areas of higher probabilities, where gender, race, and class forces are always intersecting them. In addition, I argue that it is important to add another parameter, that of leisure, as a valid element in the dynamic of cultural production and cultural transformation.

I base my recommendation in the research by scholars such as Arreola (2002), Rojas (1999), Villa (2000), Tatum (2001) and Gomez (2002), that has relocated the role played by leisure, fun, and picaresque works in border communities, as functional emotional buffer zones. As they explain, in many occasions fun works as contested areas, sometimes even between the real and the unreal. In these oppressed communities, fun allows for the survival of the subjugated status of the crude reality of everyday life. In addition, as Diaz (2005) argues the "barrio social relations cannot be defined solely as a culture of resistance. It is also a culture of celebration" (p. 55). In this case, color becomes an element for picaresque intervention, as political joker, or just a way to comfort the cruelty of everyday. In the coming section,



I will review Chicana/o color through the lens of a modified duGay's Circle of Culture, not in order to map their color palette(s), but rather to explore a Chicana/o Color history via the mechanism of a *chromatic genealogy* defined for issues of identity, production, consumption, regulation, representation, and leisure framed within issues of power, control and self valorization. The scope is not to map or frame a fixed interpretation of Chicana/o color, but rather to explore this dynamic chromatic genealogy and its multiple components, as cultural, political, economical, and historical forces affect it.

#### ***A. Consumption.***

Generally when referring to consumption, the discourse focuses on the processes involved in transferring goods from their production stages to individual or collective consumers/users. However, I would like to define consumption as an obvious and intrinsic process that promotes the creation of specific cultural productions. In this case, I want to expand on the discourse developed earlier referencing the construction of otherness. Here, the consumption of the Other is possible by creating precise ideological imaginings around the bright colors of the *folkloric*, and in including the colorful Other. In this section, I want to explore how those discourses of 'bright colors' are used to frame the Chicana/o Latina/o Communities of the American Southwest.

For example, in referring to Chicana/os, the *Best Places Southern California* Guide says,

As you travel through Southwest California, notice the exaggerated sense of color to be found in Hispanic neighborhoods... Hear the soft cadences of Spanish spoken in the streets, smell the scents of Latin American cooking and marvel at the wildly decorated lowrider cars on the roads beside you. (Sandow Birk, *Spanish Roots, and Chicano Culture*, p. 14)

Here the use of the word *exaggerated* implies a binary between 'proper' and improper. Its usage signals a dichotomy in the use of color; on one side, there is the 'common sense,' and on the other side, there is the "exaggerated" (or deviant) one, which is located outside the norm. Particularly noteworthy is the fact the color is further associated with other cultural practices, such as food and language. Hence, on the basis of aesthetically-based associations, all other subsequent related practices become exaggerated or deviant as well. In this occurrence, the non-normative use of color opens the door for the definition of the outcast, the exotic Other. Color use is perceived as deviant and out of the norm, such as lowriders, which are categorized as wild, clearly alluding to savage connotations. With the acceptance of this value-specific mindset, food, language, smells, and car transformations can become eroticized, eroticized, and fetishized. All these practices achieve the same status, that of exaggeration. What at first glance may look as an apparent positive element may be turned into a tactic used to reinforce the exotic otherness of Chicana/o Latina/os.

In another example, from July 11, 1988, *Time* magazine released a special issue entitled, *Magnífico: Hispanic Culture Breaks Out of the Barrio*. Here, *Time* explores the developments of the Latino/ “Hispanic” community in the United States as a growing force emerging from the barrio. Without delving into the rhetoric utilized at that time in reference to the term Hispanic, and the implications of deviancy found in the issue’s title, the magazine refers to color as an intrinsic element of the Chicana/Latina/os historical identity. In their words, “Latin colors and shapes in clothing and design, with their origins deep in the Moorish curves of Spain or the ancient cultures of Central and South America, are now so thoroughly mixed into the [American] mainstream that their source is often forgotten” (Gibbs, p. 68). In this occurrence, color exemplified historical ties, a “merge from a variety of separated traditions” (p. 69). However, they polarize their color analysis when they suggest a romantic and nostalgic recount of history, in an overt example of Orientalism. In this case, the exotic Other is exemplified by their “vivid color[s]” (p. 69). The problem is that an argument as crucial as the historicity of color becomes conflated with rhetoric tinged with nostalgic racial elements.

The writers in the article even suggest a “vibrant” (p. 68) palette of colors that exemplified this community consisting of “jewel colors of ruby, emerald, luscious purples, used with black or mixed together” (p. 70). The article uses the presence and statements of a Los Angeles fashion designer, Ofelia Montejano, to authenticate the indigenous origins of color in a

decidedly romantic version of history and poverty. As she is quoted, “using bright colors this way draws on my heritage, [...] when I was a girl in Michoacán, Mexico, I admired the way even the poorest people made use of color. They take raw color and use it in a very honest way” (p. 70). Once again, the argument of color is validated by assumptions surrounding the purity of the primitive Other — in a manner similar to Goethe’s concept of humans “in state of nature,” poor people use color in a “raw” state and in a “very honest way,” in opposition to the corrupted ways of the present.

The assumption here is that by reproducing the color palette of poor people, ‘civilized’ people can achieve some of the purity and honesty vanquished by modern society. Ironically, one may conclude that Montejano’s arguments position her as a ‘civilized’ being on the other side of the spectrum given that she as Mexican herself provides this color-based assessment about poor people from Michoacán, Mexico. However, within this defined view of color, she can be ensnared in the game and cannot escape her ‘exotic’ status as a Mexican woman of color. Further, as is seen in this article, Montejano is depicted in a picture holding a maraca in one hand and a Chihuahua dog in another. Her image is accompanied in the picture by two models wearing colorful bull-fighter/*matador* style dresses all played against a busy background of piñatas and Spanish/colonial ceramics. She reproduces the allegory of the folk Mexican, tied with the vivid colors of her creations. Seemingly, she is at the end reduced to just a personification of the exotic, the vivid colors of the poor, and the Other.

Carolina Herrera is a fashion designer portrayed contrastingly in the article. The text about Herrera and her image are presented antithetically to the colorful and flamboyant *mexicanismo* of Montejano. Herrera as a modernized, acculturated Latina is pictured monochromatically and alone, without facial expressions, and within an empty background. She is blonde and is wearing all white clothes. Her depiction represents the mainstream status of the ‘civilized’ and acculturated. For her, “taste is universal [...] you either have it or you do not” (p. 68). In this perception, color becomes part of the universal discourse, and differentiation through color is valid only when used, as she says “elegantly” (p. 69) and as an “expression of good taste” (p. 69). In the article, Herrera exemplifies a strongly modernist approach of a universal style, which elevates individuals (who embrace this style) to a higher level of taste. However, I argue that this particular interpretation of taste is presented as valid because it signifies, (following the tradition initiated by Goethe), the preference for solely adhering to a Eurocentric aesthetic. In the best case, the bright colors often associated with a Latino/Mexican style are ‘authenticated’ only when they are presented as background to glorify mainstream Eurocentric perceptions about style. For example, the picture of Montejano is accompanied with the text “[she] weaves the jewel tones of her Mexican heritage into her fabrics” (p. 69) while Herrera picture’s quote reads “clothes with romance sewn into the seams” (p. 69). Here, the presentation of these two Latina designers is markedly different: one based on her ethnic/national background with allusions to

Indian/artisan qualities of weaving and textiles. In the other, Herrera's nationality and ethnic ancestry are omitted, and her qualities are romanticized through the non-obvious (and interiorized) practice of sewing (see Figure 14).

I believe that these two designers, Montejano and Herrera (as they have been portrayed in this *Time* magazine article) exemplify well the two central arguments used in the American mainstream to analyze and interpret Latina/o Chicana/o communities' use of color — framed in a binary between the exotic and the romantic. Sue Hannah is the co-chair of Color Marketing Group [CMG]<sup>13</sup>, during an interview for the American magazine *Demographics* (2002), she stated that the influences on color in the marketplace for Latina/os are defined by their palette of “romantic and passionate earth-connected colors [of] red, yellows, and oranges” (p. 35). I contend that her selection of adjectives is not coincidental; on the contrary, her choice of words clearly demonstrates how fourteen years after the *Time* magazine article, mainstream designers still define Latino communities by following the same fictive allegories ascribed to Montejano.

Furthermore, I see the predominance of the use of terms such as “romantic” and “passionate” as a means to evoke/refer to the imaginary mystical Southwest, for example as they are expressed in qualities associated

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<sup>13</sup> CMG is an international association of color professionals, color scholars, and design teachers interested in color. It was founded in 1962 and it is located in Alexandria, Virginia. Their membership includes individuals from more than 20 countries.<sup>13</sup> GMC is one of the most influential color analyzing groups, providing color forecasts that try to predict color trends and chromatic preferences for manufactured products and the services industry, sometimes 19 months in advance.

with the *Señorita/Bandido* duets. Here these mainstream metaphors/myths are used to separate Latinos from the rest of 'civilized' society, leaving them open to be further characterized as passionate beings driven by uncontrolled desires and rage. In this case, color, in the discourses of *Times* magazine is used to perpetuate narratives of savage, primitive, exotic, and uncivilized.



Figure 14. Figure showing the layout of the article, and the distribution of the images depicting both Montejano and Herrera as two fashion designers in diametric opposition.

In addition, one can also take their “earth-connected” qualities and link individuals from these groups to blue-collar jobs and “dirty” manual labor. Certainly, beyond the politics of the language used about color, and its ties to the exoticization and commodification of the Other, we may wonder, if any genuine research-based arguments exist that substantiate the prevalent belief that Latina/os prefer ‘warm’ colors? What is truly known about color in Mesoamerica? How have Mesoamerican communities influenced Chicana/o color perception and preferences, if any? What happens in terms of color preference and expression when new immigrant Latina/os move into an ‘American’ neighborhood?

### ***B. Identity.***

“They sell as many colours for painters as may be found in Spain, and all of excellent hues” (Spanish Conquistador, Hernán Cortes, 17th Century).<sup>14</sup>

Before I engage in the exploration of color and the issue of identity regarding Chicana/os, it is important to understand that, in the case of this community, its emergence did not transpire in isolation. On the contrary, it is the product of the interconnection of several historical, political, and geographical components, with a mixture from Anglo, Spanish, Native

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<sup>14</sup> This is an abstract from Hernán Cortés the Spanish conquistador’s second letter to the Emperor Charles V, reporting on street/market vendors at Temixtitlan, after his arrival to the Mexico in 1819.



American and Mexican Indian elements. What is often presented in the mainstream as a homogenous and stable community, Chicana/os and Latina/os in the United States are in reality the merging of diverse groups, some of them with very distinctive historical development, (e.g. Mexico and Puerto Rico), and not always unified by language (e.g. Spanish, Portuguese, and indigenous dialects), religion, or ancestry. Furthermore, they diverge in their approach to issues such as class, race, gender, and their relationship and obligations to the nation state. These differences apply also to their relationship to color.

The case of Chicana/o and 'bright' color has been linked to pre-Columbian Indio communities in Latino America, specifically Mexico. John Gage makes a compelling study on the use of color and its application to production. He notes that "Alfonso de Molina lists around fourteen Nahuatl colour terms, and the Inca languages Quechua and Aymara each includes some dozen [color terms] in the sixteenth century" (107). Gage mentions how color was an intrinsic part of the relationships in pre-colonial communities and how it created their space, history and everyday life, "a high level of sophistication that resonated with their high degree of [color] conceptualization" (109).

Current studies of Mexican Americans and their use of color show that their ancestral practices have carried through to the present. For example, in a modern ritual of the Maya Quiche group, the largest Indo community in Guatemala and Centro America, color plays a crucial role in their celebration

of Mother Earth. In a ceremony organized by the Instituto para el Resurgimiento Indígena Salvadoreño (RAIS) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), four Indigenous groups from El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama gather to honor Mother Earth in El Salvador. As recorded by the newspaper *El Salvador*, Abuelo (grandpa) Fermin, a 62 year old Maya quiché priest said the following during the ceremony,

*Oh Madre Tierra, que los colores rojos purifiquen nuestra sangre y nuestro espíritu*" ["Oh Mother Earth, that the red colors purified our blood and our spirit"] "*Vamos a invocar el negro para que nuestros recuerdos queden en las plantas*" ["let us invoke the black so our memory will remain in the plants"]. (Rivera, par. 23-24)

For this Maya community, color has held the power linked with earth and history. In their ceremony, a circle with colored candles represents the main focus, the central point of convergence. The circle is built with red, black, white, and yellow candles representing the four directions of the cosmic universe. At the center, there are green and blue candles that symbolize Mother Earth's heart and the center of the sky. In this configuration, each color has a meaning that is constructed by the conjunction of the tangible and the intangible; it has a place and a space in their cosmology. Furthermore, each color represents an activity linked to their agrarian traditions and to their personal and communal health. The color white marks the sunrise in the East, and the color black the sunset, with the allusion to life and death. Red is a symbol of life and yellow of fertility.

This connection between color with time and the physical environment achieves even greater proportions in Herman W. Konrad's (1991) studies of the Indian communities of Chan Santa Cruz and the Holy Cross of the Quintana Roo Maya, Yucatan Mexico. The arrangement of space and physical buildings by these communities follows a strong belief system that focuses on "taking crosses." Here, "reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype" (Konrad, p. 9). Color and materiality are encompassed by the notion of the sacred.

Their cosmology is divided between the sky and earth, where a succession of thirteen upper and nine lower layers are connected by a central giant tree or *ceiba* that link both realities, similar with other Mayan allegories that use the Tree of Life. Color is fundamental to their interpretations of space within their cosmology. Green is at the center as a "signified the fifth of the cardinal directions, it being the reference point for the other directions, each with its own color association (east = red, west = black, south = yellow, north = white). These primary world directions and colors were frequently applied to the deities themselves, who had a multiplicity of characteristics" (p. 127). Interestingly, the same colors are organized differently than in the previous example; however, the centrality of green and the rotation of the other colors around it remain.

Unfortunately, as we observed with Gage, many archeological studies on color have been tinted with notions of Orientalism and Otherness. In these cases, color, when referring to pre-colonial communities, perpetuates ideals

of savagery. For example, Dick Teresi (2003) in his book *Lost Discoveries: The Ancient Roots of Modern Science – from the Babylonians to the Maya*, argues that “given the spiritual significance of blood in Mayan and Aztec life, the color red was important. The Mayan derived red from a variety of sources: the annatto tree [...] and the cochineal croton tree. Dye from the ‘red tree’ was used as a substitute for human blood” (p. 321). In this case, the arguments around the color red are tied to discourses that present Aztecs and Mayans predominately as blood-centered and killing communities.

I am not denying the human sacrifices may have taken place in those communities. What is problematic here is the relevance given to red, only because represents blood. Here, the color red is used to attest to Mayan and Aztec primitive status. This link between blood, violence, and these pre-colonial communities is crucial because it is a recurrent element, in the twentieth century, used to represent and typify Chicana/os and consequently their cultural productions. These assumptions will propel state regulatory relationships with such cultural practices as murals, lowriders, Zoot suiters and tattoos. Once the argument of deviancy and violence has been created and linked with color, an easy pathway has been established to enable the demonization of Chicana/os as the heirs of pre-Columbian communities (as will be explored later regarding the California Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940’s).

### ***C. Representation***

When we use the term representation in relation to cultural productions, we should always ask, 'Whose representations we are referring?' On one hand, we can refer to the producers, those who created these cultural manifestations. However, we can also talk about representation by exploring how a culture materializes and signifies its values in those productions. In this case, when I am referring to representation, I am addressing how Chicana/os scholars see color as a representation of the Chicana/o identity. Here, I want to explore how they address color and how they have explored color. This section is divided into two parts. The first part pertains to the use of color by Chicana/os; the second part concerns how Chicana/o scholars in academia have intellectualized color uses. This section is about color as it has been linked to a Chicana/o identity and will help to contextualize how low/riders use color.

In terms of Chicana/o color theory, some contemporary academic remarks regarding the use of color and its connection with the Chicana/os space can be found in Alicia Gaspar De Alba's (1998) *Chicano Art: The Cara Exhibition*. Her work focuses predominantly in exploring the intrinsic philosophy of borderland/contact zone production within the Chicana/o communities. For her, hybridity, *mestizaje*, the fight over space hegemony, self-history, and social inequity represent the major driving forces in Chicana/o borderland production. As she says:

Borderland citizens are dealing with a project of definition, with  
conceives of the border not only as the limits of two countries,  
but as a... cardinal intersection of many realities... our great challenger  
is to invent a new [visual] language capable of articulating our  
incredible circumstances...[the borderland is] a place where the so-  
called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore become  
comprehensible. (p. 34)

Here, she explores the intrinsic process of self-survival experienced at the  
borderlands. For her, Chicana/o production plays multiple roles, allowing  
those communities to overcome the difficulties imposed on them. It is only by  
multi-tasking that borderland productions are able to survive and fulfill the  
limited resources available. Gaspar de Alba is not alone in her assessment, as  
Amalia Mesa-Bains a San Francisco-based Chicana artist, also adds, “our arts  
function both as collective memory and alternative chronicle” (Gomez-Peña,  
1992, p. 69). As she explains, border productions work alternatively to  
mainstream narratives. Moreover, simultaneously they serve as a means for  
communal storytelling based on of their experiences and in their own terms.  
Furthermore, Gaspar de Alba (1998), adds that:

The artist has multiple roles... is not just an image maker or a  
marginal genius, but a social thinker/ educator/ counter  
journalist/civilian diplomat/human rights observer... The artist has  
been forced to develop multidimensional roles. (p. 34)

This allows novelist Tomas Rivera to contextualize that Chicano visual culture, “has a triple mission: to represent, and to conserve that aspect of life that the Mexican American holds as his own and at the same time destroy the invention by others of his own life” (p. 34). This quality of multiple of roles played by the visual material world in the borderlands is evident in the stress infringed over Chicana/os on their spaces and the constant redefinition of the requirement for cultural survival and in their resistance to forced enculturation. This notion of multi-semiotic values and roles played within the borderland will aid in understanding the complexity of visual image and car transformation within the sphere low/riders, but it will also frame car customizations and car color use within the Chicana/o world.

Specifically about color, one of the first Chicana/o references is found in the book *The Chicanos: As We See Ourselves* by Chicano scholar Arnulfo D. Trejos (1979). Trejos positioned color at the same level of other cultural productions — as an independent element for cultural resistance. As he says, “making use of folklore, local color, and the Spanish language, including some of the crude speech of the working class, they unfold the drama of the Chicano” (p. 209). For him, the use of color exemplifies not just an imposition over space, but also a need to retell stories and drama, with its own visual language. Therefore, it is important to understand that Chicana/o color expression cannot be separated from their spatial and historical context. In a space of limited resources, Chicana/os maximize their impact with the use of the aesthetics of resistance. In the case of Chicana/o productions, space

becomes, by the use of aesthetics and colors, a new place for distraction, cultural safety, and auto-academia among members. Color visual creations must be evaluated as a tool to contest, challenge, negotiate, and create identity, but also for undertaking the challenges presented everyday.

In this regard, Edward Lachman, the cinematographer responsible for the movie *Selena*,<sup>15</sup> perceives color as an intrinsic component to the emotions and storytelling in Chicana/o communities. For Lachman, color affects our interaction with space, while at the same time reflecting the experience of the barrio. In discussing how color was used to represent Selena's life, he says,

Color is very important to Latinos. It is a part of our world, one that has a more intense use of color than the Anglo world. We use color to weave the emotions of the story. Selena grew up in an Anglo neighborhood, so we used umbers and monotones colors to reflect that experience. Then she is introduced to her Latino heritage, we began to use more pastel primary colors, which are indicative of that culture. (Silverblutt, 1999, p. 225)

As Lachman explains, color is used in the movie, and consequently in the imagination of the viewers, to materialize the social relationships of space and race, at the same time that it is used to define class and cultural features.

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<sup>15</sup> Selena was a famous Latina singer, who died tragically in the late 1990s just as her career was taking off. For many Chicana scholars, her life represents a good example of cross-border, transnational sufficiency within the U.S-Mexico Border, and therefore the Chicana experience.



For Lachman, color denotes the existence of a vivid spirit and a different approach to life.

This argument of the intrinsic connection of color with barrio life is not new. For example, David Ruiz (2005) in his book *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning and American Cities* argues that, "the eclectic use of color resonates into the urban streetscapes... [as] a major characteristic of barrio life" (p. 55). Apparently for Ruiz, color is not just one of many elements but also constitutes one of the pivotal identifiers of Barrio visual identity. This interpretation matches the research findings of scholars such as Daniel Arreola (1998), Pablo Villa (2000), and Mike Davis (2001). These works exemplify how during the last decade researchers have started to link the use of space and color, how that relationship communicates social meanings, and how color can be used to record transformations in landscape ownership. The argument of these scholars is that changes in color patterns within the city fabric can be used to explore the ethnic changes on the city and the rise of new Latino settlements.

As Daniel Arreola, (1988) professor of cultural geography at Arizona State University stated in his article "Mexican American Housescapes," "for Mexican American barrio, color is an important component of an ensemble of cues that led an ethnic identity to the landscape" (p. 305). Arreola's work follows Arthur Ruben's findings regarding the correlation between the incidence of "vividly colored... magenta, bright yellow, apple green, and robin's egg blue" (p. 305) in the barrios of Brownsville, Texas and the ethnic

composition of its habitants. As Arreola explains, the neighborhoods with the "highest percentages of Mexican born residents" were also the places with the highest percentages of "brightly painted houses" (p. 305). Arreola also explains how these aesthetic transformations infringed on the space independently of the historical origin of the neighborhood. In his survey of 1,065 houses in San Antonio, Texas, Arreola found that in Mexican-American neighborhoods almost 50 percent of the houses have "brightly painted exteriors" (p. 305). He suggests that there is a direct relationship between the use of these colors and the historic evolution of Latino America by tracing these colors palettes to the Mediterranean landscapes that were transported by Spaniards during the conquest. For him, color did play an essential role in the construction of a collective *mestiza/o* identity that characterizes the U.S. - Mexico landscape. Finally, Arreola argues that,

The use of color on exterior façade, a practice initiated by the Spanish during the colonial era, can be used to identify a Mexican American housescape [...] The awning color communicate the proprietor's place of origin. The perceptive eye notes the difference between the shades of yellow and blue [...] the most common color schemes are Mexico's national flag's hues of green, red, and white which are selectively used on storefronts and commercial spaces for lease. (p.147)

As compelling as Arreola's arguments are, they also can be problematic. For example, even if one accepts the concept that the color of a house truly defines its occupant's ethnicity and origin, there is no guarantee

that when the house is sold the new owner will keep or change the colors based on his/her ethnicity. Therefore, are the current owners, the ones that painted the house, or they just leave it as they get it? Do they leave the colors because they identify with them or just because they do not have the money/time to repaint? In addition, Arreola never discusses the limitations created by the economic conditions that limit the ability for Chicano/Latina/o (especially new) immigrants to own a house and the consequent necessity for them to sublease/rent properties. In that case, further study is needed to explore the relation of color and home ownership. Finally, what has been the role of homeowner associations (HOA) in defining and limiting the external features of some building and neighborhoods? It is essential to note that cultural re-appropriation allows a group to assimilate or reproduce the aesthetics of another group in a way that color can be used in a number of ways: to live similarly to the other culture, to gain control over the other, or simply to increase profits by attracting the other. In this regard, how can the use of color exacerbate ethnic tensions?

Mike Davis (2001), a well-known Chicano urban researcher and writer, has expressed the cultural conflict generated by the use of color between the growing Latino communities around the nation and traditional mainstream Anglo communities. In his trilogy of works, *Ecology of Fear* (1999), *Magical Urbanism* (2001), and *City of Quartz* (2006), he explores the urban landscape as an embattled cultural zone, where hegemonic/racial power plays a central role in the development and planning of a post-

industrial Los Angeles. Furthermore and in his view, cities all over the United States have started to suffer an intrinsic core transformation as product of massive Latina/o settlements and new influx of immigrants, which has become particularly notable in the physical space (see Figure 15). In *Magical Urbanism* (2001), for example, he refers to the urban landscape as a new depository of *Magical Realism*, a concept that previously had only been applied in the realm of Latino Literature. He says:

Neighborhood aesthetic wars have become commonplaces as Latino carnivality collides with the psychosexual anxieties of Truman Show White residential culture. Thus the glorious sorbet palette of Mexican and Caribbean house paint – *verde limón, rosa mexicano, azul añil, morado* – is perceived as sheer visual terrorism by non-Hispanic homeowners who believe that their equity directly depends upon a neighborhood color order of subdued pastels and white picket fences. (p. 20)

Just as Arreola, Davis creates a direct connection between the transformation in the ownership composition of the city and the use of color. However, Davis takes this idea further by relating it also to transformations at the juridical level, by the creation of city ordinances and local laws meant to regulate Chicana/o use of color throughout the city, in what he defined, as overt social-legal mechanisms for racial discrimination. He says,

Even upwardly mobile Chicana/os have joined in the backlash against ‘un-American’ hues, as in the L.A. suburb of South Gate where the city

Council recently weighed an ordinance against tropical house colors, or San Antonio where writer Sandra Cisneros has long outraged city fathers with her deeply expressive purple house... In many communities, [these] ...ordinances... have become a form of racial profiling. (p. 20)

These kinds of observations by Davis match Hebdige's (1979) interpretations on the aesthetic dynamic between mainstream culture and counter (or emergent) cultures. In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige perceives the process of color policing/regulation by mainstream through ordinances and restrictions as constituting responses to a natural process of self-defense — when the mainstream culture, under 'threat' by subcultures, will try to stop or slow down the spread of these 'rebellion' aesthetic practices and productions.

In those cases, hegemonic groups will minimize the social impact of these deviant color tendencies and will try to enforce the restoration of aesthetic balance. The aesthetic 'noise' created by a counter culture is silenced by the jurisdictional system owned by mainstream. For Hebdige, hegemonic groups try to minimize the importance to subversive color uses by re-appropriating those 'new uses.' However, their incorporation results in caricature versions that are commodified and distorted. This characterization of Chicana/o cultural practices is what Mike Davis (2000) has termed "*Taco Bell Moderne*" (Tropicalizing, p. 21) and has resulted in the commodification of Latino architecture, patterns, symbols and color palettes

by corporations and mass media. For Davis, Taco Bell Moderne is one of the forces behind the advancement and perpetuation of the exotic Latino in mainstream nowadays. Within this context, it would be valuable to explore how color is regulated.



*Figure 15. Photo showing an example of South Phoenix and the use of color as a means of differentiation in the context of a Barrio vernacular architecture.*

#### ***D. Regulation***

Color per se is not tangible, and objects are produced and read in a cultural context. In general, the social expectancies fixed upon objects, in a time and place, amplify the social impact of any variations such as color code transgressions. One of the first documented cases that confronted Chicana/o use of color at the juridical level is the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles in 1943. In the words of Mauricio Mazón (1984), the combination of racial prejudice and the notions of what was perceived as appropriate in attire color, ‘in times

of austerity' during WWII created the conditions for pronounced cultural dissonance and the attendant violence that erupted into the Zoot Suit Riots. As Stuart Cosgrove indicates, color proved to be an essential tool in the negotiation of cultural self-identity for Chicana/os youth community of the 1940s and a central factor in the riots conflict,

The zoot-suit was more than the drape-shape of 1940s fashion, more than a colourful stage-prop hanging from the shoulders [...], it was, in the most direct and obvious ways, an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating an identity. The zoot suit was a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede the manners of subservience.

(Cosgrove, 1984, 158)

In this case, the suit — because of its shape, color, and the practices around it — became an element for self-definition, mainstream cultural refusal, and racial dispute. In this regard, it is important to remember that the Zoot-Suit youngsters, as members of the Mexican-American Generation, were the sons and daughters from those who migrated in massive numbers from Mexico to the United States as a consequence of the Mexican Civil War of 1910.

Differently than their parents who believed in the system and may have perceived their presence in the United States as temporal, the Mexican-American Generation viewed themselves as belonging to the United States, and with full rights. This difference defined how it is that Zoot Suiters felt entitled to challenge society more explicitly than their parents, and contextually set in motion the consequent development during the late

1960s of the Chicano Generation — creating an identity for them, one that recognized their difference, as bi-national beings, while simultaneously calling attention to the injustice experienced was at the core of this generation's aesthetic embrace of Zoot Suits and will nourish the later low-rider experience.

As a young Malcolm X later described, the Zoot Suit became, “a killer-diller coat,” a symbol of marked deviancy for the mass media. Because of the war, the use of wool was rationed thus reducing the production of suits and changing their styles to meet the shorter supply of material, and creating what *Esquire* magazine defined as the “streamlined suits by Uncle Sam” (Schoeffler, 1973, p. 161). However, Zoot Suiters, by using underground tailors, never stopped the production of their distinctive, fabric-intensive suits.

In addition to the fabric selection and styling, the implementation of bright colors was used to gain visual attention and reinforce a cultural statement. This act of flamboyant performance of color was perceived as an antipatriotic act (p. 161) by the mainstream. Under those circumstances, the Zoot Suiters were targeted, an act that culminated with the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. In this case, color reproduces in the social body, the elements associated with national unity and forced enculturation. The refusal from Chicanos to accommodate governmental and social limitations must be analyzed within the context of cultural self-definition.



Wearing a Zoot Suit was perceived as a moral outrage by the mass media as well as the state authorities, not only because it was tied with criminality and violence, as in the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon Case, but mainly because it openly insulted the laws of common sense and civility. This is well manifested by Mexican Nobel Prize writer, Octavio Paz, when he said that Zoot Suits were "a symbol of love and joy or of horror and loathing, an embodiment of liberty of disorder, of the forbidden." Here Paz expresses the social norms associated to aesthetic values, simultaneously allowing us to understand the role played by the transgression on color codes. Color transgression, as Hebdige (1979) has expressed, allows subjugated communities to redefine themselves in relationship with mainstream, and in terms that mainstream can uncontroversially understand.

More recently in the late 1990s, another case of color regulation by mainstream occurred. A well-known Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros, painted her house a *periwinkle purple* color in the San Antonio's neighborhood of King William (see Figure 16). What can be viewed as an utterly ordinary and everyday practice in most neighborhoods, erupted into a national debate and a lawsuit over the rights of individual citizens, homeowner associations, city historical designations, and the perpetuation of visual cultural hegemony. At that time, San Antonio preservation officials deemed the Cisneros' color as historically incorrect and unsuitable for the Victorian neighborhood and wanted it changed.



*Figure 16. Photo of Sandra Cisneros' Periwinkle Purple House in King William District, San Antonio.*

Her response was “depends on whose history you are talking about... this is San Antonio, not St. Anthony's” (1997, para. 10). After a long battle, multiple interviews, and protests, she won her case and was permitted to keep her purple-colored house. The house has since become a tourist attraction. Ironically, in the end, the searing Texas’ sun faded its color and the purple has become a dark blue, and as she said, “the house is legal now.” As she said during an interview:

The issue is bigger than my house. The issue is about historical inclusion. I want to paint my house a traditional color... I thought I had painted my house a historic color. Purple is historic to us. It only goes back a thousand years or so to the pyramids. It is present in the Nahua codices, book of the Aztecs, as is turquoise, the color I used for my

house trim; the former color signifying royalty, the latter, water and rain. (Cisneros, 1997, para. 7)

It is clear in Cisneros' arguments that color represents a visible link with her ancient ancestral past; color allows her to retell her based upon her people's history from their own perspective. Furthermore, Cisneros argues that color represents a tool to reclaim ownership of their own history of struggle, a story that has been deleted from main canonical history books.

As she explains,

Color is a story. It tells the history of a people. We don't have beautiful showcase houses that tell the story of the class of people I come from. But our inheritance is our sense of color. It has withstood conquests, plagues, genocide, hatred, defeat. Our colors have survived. (Cisneros, 1997, para. 11)

For Cisneros, colors constitute depositories of collective histories, in the case of the Chicana/o Community, of borderland epistemologies, about their enduring experience of survival. For her, color holds the quality to perpetuate cultural values, and enables the transmission of those values over generations, in a way that is almost clandestine. In this case, colors of significant cultural import survived other forms of cultural oppression by their unique characteristics.

Furthermore, she introduces an adroit intellectual move by pairing the reading of color with speech/written language. In so doing, she accomplishes two crucial objectives. First, her approach recognizes that

Chicana/o Latinos have a different color visual language; and, secondly, it ties the problem she confronted with her house with a larger issue: diversity inclusion in United States Society. As she explains, it is not sufficient to recognize Chicana/os different use of color, but it requires recognizing this color language as equal valuable in society. In her view, the inclusion of color language diversity is tied to issues of ethnical/racial inclusion and hegemony. In her words,

Color is a language. In essence, I am being asked to translate this language. For some who enter my home, these colors need no translation. However, why am I translating to the historical professionals? If they're not visually bilingual, what are they doing holding a historical post in a city with San Antonio's demographics? (Cisneros, 1997, para. 10)

Clearly, Cisneros, is not satisfied with only recognizing the historical value of purple, but she further calls for a serious reevaluation of the institutional process of the validation of color and aesthetics, both socially and locally. As she argues, the unique characteristics of the Border require a unique set of epistemic and theoretical tools that recognize its inherent diversity and heterogenic composition.

Therein lies the dilemma about whose ownership is exalted and who claims the primacy of continuity with physical space — a dilemma that can manifest itself in a battle over the materialization of social/political hegemony by color and aesthetics. This case is important not only because of

the validity of a specific color as a Latino element and the legal recognition of a palette precedence, or by the discourse created around historicity, but rather because it draws attention to the processes of regulation of color in the public space and its intersections with race and class. In reality, it can be argued that the Cisneros' case is more about the politics of race and class than about color itself, or even more precisely about the politics of aesthetics and the struggle for cultural hegemony. In this case, color is only the instrument to negotiate a broader issue. These concepts will be useful in understanding how low-riders use, appropriate, and conceptualize the use of color within the context of their minority status and as a means to tell their story and carry their past to the present and toward a better future.

### ***E. Production***

In this last section, I want to focus on how Chicana/o artists perceive color and also explore the arguments about the existence of a unified/homogenous color palette by Chicana/o artists. Doing so allow us to compare to what extent a single color palette has been embraced (or not) as a common trend in the production or as differential components of Chicana/o artists.

As I started to examine the vast variety of Chicana/o art production from a chromatic point of view, it became evident that this production reflects a tremendous diversity of colors. Indeed, the use of color depends on a multiplicity of factors, including: the medium used, the artist's scope, the

intention of the piece, the time period, geographical locale, and the artist's intellectual position within the Chicana/o experience. First of all, the arguments for color in Chicana/o art are tied with the core questions of what is Chicana/o art and how do we define its boundaries; by its thematic construct — by the ethnicity of the artist, by the materials, by their location, by its intentionality, or by their color palette? In considering the substance of Chicana/o art, it can be viewed as all and perhaps none of those elements at once. I argue that Chicana/o art cannot be reduced to a singular element. Just as Jacinto Quirarte (1984) explains, "Chican[a/]o Art is not exclusively tied to the media used nor to its context or subject matter, but to the purposes of the work, and the artist's intent, self-identity, attitude, and approach (individual or collective) to the creation of a work of art" (p. 3). For Quirarte, intentionality and context become even more relevant because they confront all the other elements of the art piece.

In terms of color, it can be argued that many different palettes have coexisted within the Chicano art production. Just as in Chicano literature where, depending on the parameters used to define it (geography, language, ethnic composition, etc.), the circle of enclosure can be reduced or expanded to include/exclude different pieces or artists. For example, when asked about color and Chicana/o art, Henry Estrada, Exhibitions and Public Programs Director for the Smithsonian Latino Center, argues that there are two different periods of Chicana/o art production, one known as *Chicano* and

another one, referred as *Post-Chicano*. As he explains, both of them have different approaches to color. In his own words,

I consider the terms "Chicano," and "Chicano art" to refer to a particular... period, late 1960s to early 80s, [and] Post-Chicano, [where] "Chicano" artists are more concerned with formal issues such as form, color, etc. Many of the artists from this generation [late 1980s to present] make post-minimalist, neo-conceptual, or non-figurative art. This is where color can be an important signifier, of many things (including, interestingly enough, Latino cultural content). (Henry Estrada, 2007, para. 2)

It is important first to clarify that the Chicana/o art that Estrada describes refers to a specific genre of *validated* productions, or what I call Gallery Chicano Art, which is heavily defined by Eurocentric parameters of high and low art/culture. As explained above, these qualifications do exclude certain types of productions by categorizing them as crafty or vernacular (see Figure 17). Such conceptualizations of Chicano art derived from notions of high and low art are particularly problematic because they perpetuate Chicana/o marginal status and/or exotic otherness.

In Estrada's point of view, these two periods, Chicano and Post-Chicano, are conceptualized based on thematic notions of abstract versus figurative. The assumption here is that figurative imagery represents a less sophisticated level of production than abstract representation. However, this approach compares and defines differences on the basis of modernistic

aesthetics that overlook local visual idiosyncrasies in favor of a homogenized aesthetic. Moreover, by assuming that color became more of an important signifier in the second period completely disengages, underestimates, and in fact marginalizes the value of color in the first period.



*Figure 17. "Dave's Dreams," the only lowrider car in the Smithsonian collection, Washington DC. (Photo: William Calvo)*

The problem is that by assuming that there was a more thoughtful use of color in the second period, it dismisses not only the work of first period as primitive, but also ascribes primitiveness to producers from this period as well. Consequently, such logic necessarily repositions the second period as *superior* and more civilized. This intellectual move from mainstream, that redefines Chicana/o art within an evolutionary timeline, oversimplifies the complexity of all Chicana/o production and interrupts its continuity and



diversity. A serious evaluation of the Chicana/o art experience encounters a multitude of aesthetics elements that belong outside the limited range of those fixed periods, at the same time, a critically-rigorous evaluation needs to be extended to other forms of cultural production that are outside traditional realm of the canvas, such as lowriders, murals, tattoos, graffiti, corridos, *altares* (altars), etc.

It is clear that this conflict or crisis of studying Chicana/o art and visual production is not because Chicana/o art is problematic or difficult in itself, but rather because it is the product of a systematic problem of the traditional Eurocentric methods used and available. In other words, the crisis of traditional methodology of analysis is external to Chicana/o art but it affects its acceptance as valid. In this regard, Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto (1985) explain,

When the Chican[a/]o movement projected its own neo-indigenism, in the 1960s, it signified equally a rejection of European (i.e. U.S. Anglo) values. Chicanos were speaking as mestizos, not just of Spanish-Mesoamerican Indian mingling, but of a mestizaje between Mexicans and North American Indian people, expressed in New Mexico today as Indo-Hispano. As a consequence of the foregoing, any treatment of Chicano art history during the last fifteen years would have to take into consideration the conjunction of historical patterns attendant not only upon the emergence of the Chicano political movement, but of the ideological differences and conflicts within

realm of art history itself which affected aesthetics and conceptual formulation for ... Chicano artists. (p. 14)

As Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto argue, defining Chicana/o art in Eurocentric terms represents a contradiction and dangerous academic move. I believe that this argument is critical in understanding how color is used in lowriders. Traditional art history and criticism based on Eurocentric philosophies have produced a 'his-story' (a male-centered understanding of history, its interpretation and narration) that explains visual productions only in terms of an intrinsic male-core Western eye, and aesthetic values, including color.

This visual framework establishes the fundamentals for the perpetuation of a hegemonic aesthetic. This imposed and inherently limited set of philosophies of beauty, taste, and 'visual common sense' represents the body of a *visual colonial project*, or what I will call *colonial epistemologies of taste*. In this case, this particular visual set of references can become an effective tool, a colonial instrument for cultural domination. This Eurocentric eye denies the validity of outsiders by under-valuing and diminishing their importance or by making them invisible. As Goethe has expressed, the Other achieves the status of being primitive "uncivilized," "Men in state of nature" or absent of an aesthetic maturity as "children."

The problem is not just that the traditional art history has excluded Chicana/os, but rather that male centered *his-story*, as it exists now, does not accommodate Chicana/o 'uniqueness.' As a result, if we continue to approach the representation of Chicano visual production solely in terms of the current

traditional model, we are perpetuating the system of colonial oppression by domesticating and surrendering Chicana/o productions. In order to evaluate and understand such productions, it is imperative to implement an alternative and robust methodological paradigm capable of seeing art history and visual production — through the eyes of the Other — rather than trying to explain them through the innately, culturally constrained European perspective of the outside.

In this regard, the magazine *NUVO* made a move toward a new conceptualization of Chicana/o art when they quoted Cheech Marin's introduction to the controversial traveling exhibition *Chicano Visions*. He stated during an interview with *NUVO*'s journalist, Julianna Thibodeaux (2004) how,

Unlike other schools, such as Expressionism or Cubism, [...] the Chicano school is not defined by similar brushstrokes, compositions, or use of color. Rather, [...] its dictation by 'sociopolitical overlay,' and the effect of the former on the evolving character of Chicanos through 'stylistic innovation' and 'blend(ing) traditional Mexican popular and religious iconography with modern images of urban angst.' (para. 1)

Here, Marin tries to distance themselves from using only formal qualifications based on productive techniques to define Chicano art. Nevertheless, he still uses a schema of Eurocentric aesthetics as their point of reference. As mentioned before, those references maintain the structures of colonial subalternity and Otherness. The implementation of Chicano art

as just another school within an established system represents another approach laden with conceptually dangerous notions. Framing Chicana/o art without questioning the system that has traditionally shown favoritism to other ethnocentric aesthetics implies on many levels that the existing system should be revalidated.

Incorporating Chicana/o art within the preexisting structures overlooks the current stage of oppression created around any visual structure outside the European narratives. In the words of Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto (1985), “defining ‘Chicano Art’ meant redefining contemporary art history and criticism” (p. 15). In other words, in order to truly integrate Chicana/o visual productions, and by default, any production from the Other, it is imperative to reevaluate the system as a whole. The problem is that without a revamped critical approach to the systematic project of visual epistemic invisibility imposed on Chicana/o art production, those wishing to achieve a detailed and contextualized understanding of this production will fall victim to the assumption that the existing (and limited) system is adequate by nature and possesses the capability to self-check and self-redirect itself in order to eliminate centuries of exclusive practices and principles.

Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto make an important observation about color, noting that a specific color palette should not be used to differentiate or generalize Chicano visual production, but rather the centrality of the intentionality and intersectionality behind the use of and motives for color

needs to be included when considering Chicano visual production. In this case, a cross-cultural consciousness and methodology are essential to comprehend such a diverse and even contradictory aesthetics, as manifested within Chicana/o art, and in this case, those related to the use of color. After all, rather than to use one isolated palette to embrace Chicana/o visual realities, it is evident that color must be explored and confronted within the particularities of each artist, the medium used, and the political context. In this regard, Estrada provides a useful approach, as he says,

I am not aware of studies interpreting the color palette of Chicano art. However, I am sure the subject has been touched upon in the interpretation of individual artists. For example, Luis Jimenez's use of eye-popping automotive colors and finishes on his fiberglass sculptures. Jimenez' roots are in pop art and popular culture. As a young man, he worked in his father's commercial sign-making shop, using neon and fiberglass for the first time. (2007, para. 1)

For Estrada, the issue of color must be dealt base in the particularity of each Chicana/o painter rather to assume general and fixed chromatic assumptions about the Chicana/o community. I understand Estrada point of view and the need of calling attention to the fact that color must be treated in the context in which it is situated. For Estrada the idea of reducing Chicano visual product to a particular color palette must be challenged and evaluated to avoid simplistic approaches.

During the formative years of what we will call the Chicana/o field,

there was the tendency to empathize a particular visual narrative, one meant to differentiate and galvanize a community in struggle. However, many of the icons and images used to symbolize the unique character of this community to the outside were linked to nationalist hetero-normative sentiments.

Therefore, a nostalgic reinterpretation of history was put in place. However, this nationalist project also endorsed the rejection to anything that did not perpetuate or validate an idealized Aztlán discourse. Ironically, this national patriarchal Chicano project utilized the similar tactics of exclusion used by mainstream to diminish and oppress them. I argue that within this context, many nationalist Chicana/os imposed a specific and limited array of colors and icons to create a sense of cohesion in an otherwise very heterogeneous community. This national project rejected and labeled many productions as less authentic, impure, white bread, sell-out, *vendido* or even as 'colonized.' Obviously, one of the problems with this fixed Chicano discourse on color is that it focuses exclusively in few idealizations of the collective self, rejecting broader cultural approaches on temporality, intersectionality, hybridity, and plurality. In this regard, for example, Edward Robbins (2003) explains that,

In the case of the U.S. Latino place making, it is reduced to discussions of mainly immigrant neighborhoods: lower middle class, working class and poorer. [...] In doing so [it] reduces Latino place to the 'glorious sorbet palette' of their homes, the creation of garden in derelict lots, the growth of street use and vibrancy in parks associate with some Latinos... If you walk though Los Angeles you will find that

there is not one Latino place but a myriad of places [... where] there is a different palette of color, a different social and spatial sensibility.

(para. 1-2)

As Edward Robbins argues, the glorification of a single 'imaginary' Chicana/o palette has given us a limited image of the Chicana/o experience, an image that is incomplete and populated by several 'blind spots.' In addition, I will argue that this 'diffused' and one-dimensional image is itself exclusionary and imperialist since it perpetuates an exotic other and ignores unquestioned the current apparatus of visual hegemony. This is why, rather than framing Chicana/o color within a specified and fixed palette or chromatic combinations, I prefer to focus on the intention(s) of the artist and the context of the piece. This approach questions the traditional models and calls much needed attention to other unifying components present in Chicana/o art, and Chicana/o border productions.

#### ***F. Summary on Chicana/o Color Genealogy:***

##### ***Exploring a Chicana/o Visual methodology***

Reading visual information is clearly a socially constructed experience and one's culture, class, gender, age, as well life experience defines the codes of one's interpretations. Since it is not possible to see or feel the color experiences of Other, social groups construct and interpret the Other within their own visual language and experiences. When those interpretations become contaminated with notions of cultural superiority and racial, ethnic,

or national misconceptions, the risk toward, as Estrada argues, of “affirming hegemonic myths of Native savagery” (Estrada, 2007, p. 48) becomes viable. I believe that the complexity of the border-mestiza/o experience with its multiple layers of meanings, like those derived in this study of color, calls for the implementation of a new kind of methodology in order to study visual culture in those groups.

This new methodology requires not only a mastering of the concepts of visual production but also an understanding of the notions of domination and resistance within a de-colonial paradigm that embrace the variables of race, gender, class, and imperially-defined notions of taste. Here, I am not talking just about writing a ‘new’ book about Chicana/o art as the solution, but rather about reevaluating the whole ‘bookcase/library,’ and the methods used to define which ‘books’ are validated, excluded, or dismissed.

I argue that the construction of color identities must be contextualized not only through the eyes of historicity and traditional aesthetic values, but also by the interaction of social relations of power and hegemony. As we have seen in the section on the Politics of Color, color also reflects non-egalitarian colonialist structures, which reproduces auto- or imposed idealization of self and otherness. In those cases, the discourses of color become a receptacle, a system, where multiple agents interact and influence each other. Mass media, transnational migrations, elite/intellectual groups, economical interests, and cultural producers create, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, the field of “cultural capital” where, in this case color, it is



institutionalized, exchanged, and utilized to define deviancy and otherness. In this chapter, color is analyzed as a production of culture by using du Gay's circle of culture (2003), where the aspects of production, regulation, consumption, representation, and identity helped to articulate a broader understanding of color from the Chicana/o experience. This approach moved away from a limited view that focuses in color only in terms of its visual manifestations, 'the color in the wall' and overlooks 'the invisible color' behind the wall, one defined by power structures.

The notion that there is color even where there is not color allows stepping away from the notions of specificity created by restricted color palettes and repositions such interpretations into a more inclusive arena of a decolonized color theory. In so doing, the focus has shifted to discourses behind the selection, imposition, or self-definition of color. It becomes clear that once color is perceived visually, it is also can be censored-interrogated-digested in the context of culture. Thus, culture and hegemony culture worked as the filtered eye controls what is seen. Because color has been firmly framed within the dynamics of visual hegemonic, it was easy to understand how color theory and assumptions around color can be used to subjugate a community.

I have tried to expose some of the multiple meanings and functions surrounding color in the Chicana/o community. I have also explored the work of several scholars, theorists, and the mass media that have constructed and perpetuated the myth of a single color palette. On one side of the

arguments, I found a strong body of scholars who connect the predominance of a defined color spectrum with historical and cultural elements. On the other hand, the perpetuation of the myth of a fixed color palette has shown to be limited and exclusionary, something that can be understood as part of the Chicana/o nationalist project as well. Undoubtedly, color happens not just in the wall but within the head of the viewer as well. Therefore, color emerged as a dynamic social production and extends considerably beyond the visible color itself.

As cultural production, the use of color becomes not only an element of visual pleasure but can be used also as a tool for provocation, disturbance, and treatment of cultural hegemony. I also discussed the mainstream processes of policing and regulating color production. Consequently, in the context of underrepresented Chicano communities, color is not randomly selected and should be understood within the juxtaposition of multiple and even contradicting realities. Karen Mary Davalos (2000) says, “people of color see with a third eye” (p. 42). In other words, marketing mass media, land ownership, geography displacement, the relationships with the nation state, citizenship, gender, race, resources available, the sense of authenticity, historicity, narrativity, and fun become some of the multiple players that define color in unique ways. When considering Chicana/o color use, the regular eye is not sufficient to see, and a new framework based on *mestizaje* and third space theory must be put in place.

At times, I found myself with more questions than answers. I started with a narrow idea of Chican/o color production, and I have ended up on an open freeway of multiple routes. As Colin Lyas argues<sup>16</sup>, “the doubts about the objectivity of our color language are philosophical doubts,” (Gaut & Lopes, 2005, p. 177) and this is especially true when those doubts are linked with discourses of power, existence, and self-valorization.

### **ON CARS AND BORDER AESTHETICS**

In order to analyze lowrider cars, it is important to first address the issue of car epistemologies. Our knowledge about cars is a crucial element in contextualizing how lowriders are understood. Just as I explained in the discourses on the politics of color, our knowledge about color and the Other frame our interpretation of what the Other does, and may be further applied in analyzing how Chicana/os have been categorized. Equally, our knowledge about cars and their expected uses frames how lowriders are perceived, treated, and largely dismissed as a form of valid expression of everyday design. In order to perceive lowriders as an expression of unique Chicana/o aesthetic epistemologies, it is important to start by taking a step back to review basic concepts about cars and alternative aesthetic knowledge. It is necessary also to examine how it is that within such borderland productions as lowriders, murals, retablos, etc., the essentials of Chicana/o aesthetic epistemologies may be found.

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<sup>16</sup> When referring to Frank Sibley’s work *Colours* (1967).

In terms of the car, we mostly contextualize automobiles as fundamental and 'sacred' objects in contemporary society. Cars provide transportation to be sure, but they also function as objects signifying the owners' status, power, autonomy, and style. Despite all the customization of lowriders, we continue to recognize them as cars. This element of recognition is crucial precisely because lowriders are able to maintain an ever-present core identity as cars along with the semiotic assumptions/values attached to them. Therefore, their subversive status is made possible and legible. In other words, lowriders signal difference subversively and creatively because all onlookers *know* what to expect when looking at a car. So, let us analyze car in the context of the United States.

Daniel Miller (2001), an anthropologist of consumption, explains in his book *Car Cultures*, that the existence and invention of the car crucially shaped the evolution and direction of humanity in the last century. Cars do significant physical, cultural, and social work from their impact on the environment to the stratification and division of labor, from the transformation of cities and urban spaces to their roles as objects of fantasy and desire. They are human-made objects but stand as very unique ones because of their foundational role in shaping industrial capitalism in the United States, as well as shaping semiotic hierarchies of national identity and social life.

Cars have been integrated intimately into our social structure; they are part of our 'natural' surroundings, seemingly as if they have always

existed. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar (1983) make this point in their book *The Popular Culture Reader* when they state that a car is constructed ideologically as “a tangible representation of who we are, and who we want our friends and neighbors to believe we are” (p. 25 ). As Miller (2001) explains, automobiles shape us because we have become oblivious to their presence, as if they were an innate part of our natural environment. Driving around the city, dealing with traffic congestion, commuting to work, the shape of our houses, and even the pollution cars create have all been absorbed into the rhythms of life today (p. 3).

To understand the complexity of the social ties created around automobiles, we just need to analyze for example, how in the United States the idea of *living the American dream* is inherently linked to car ownership. In addition, the notion of citizenship is deeply connected to cars, to the point that a driver’s license — a document meant originally only to validate an individual’s capacity to *manipulate* a machine (a car) — is used to demonstrate a person’s legal basis to work, to get public medical services, and even to inhabit and travel within the nation state. In this case, driver’s licenses are used as a symbol of identification; therefore, they represent a reductionism of identity.

For Miller (2001), the importance of a car as an expression of material culture is based on not only in its functionality and what people are able to do with it as a medium of transportation, but also because cars have been integrated as fundamental features of what it means to exist as a human

today, or as civilized in the West (p. 2). In this case, the social values attributed to automobiles reach beyond their basic utility as transportation devices because they become surrogates or extensions of a community, a nation, or a person's character and identity. Brenda Jo Bright (1995) explains in her book *Looking High and Low* that in the case of lowriders, "they [are] more than just transportation, they [are] markers of identity... They [are] identified with their owners, and by extension, with both his 'home' turf and his cohort" (p. 101). It is in this context (where cars are highly charged with social and historical value) then that lowriders' re-appropriations and customizations cannot be interpreted as arbitrary, especially when considering how Chicana/os have been traditionally disenfranchised from the *American Dream*.

Aaron Betsky (1997) in *Icons: Magnets of Meaning* explains that the importance of icons is determined not by their pragmatic usefulness, but by their ability to represent and synthesize the social values of a group and by their utility as repositories of social "condensations" (p. 27). In other words, icons can be understood as unique objects that, because their position in the social spectrum of objects, represent particular intersections where social values intercross. Icons are more than mere objects because they are depositories of multiple superlative semiotic values simultaneously. In the case of the United States, cars have been elevated to an *iconic* level, as embodiments of American modernist values about technology, development, and progress. In other words, they are very special kinds of cultural artifacts

because their conspicuous presence has been tied to notions of progress, power, and status. Automobiles have become intrinsic components of the United States landscape. In addition, at one level, cars can be seen as pivotal tools of and for capitalism. They function as mechanisms for mobilizing the work force, but in the same process, they also perpetuate urban segregation, limit class mobility, reinforce patterns of capital distribution, and damage the environment. Brenda Jo Bright (1995) observes that cars are an “important source of conflict in the lives of barrio people” (p. 95). Automobiles signify many of the conditions of capitalist repression over Latino communities, as exemplified in such infamous cases as Chicano Park in San Diego, or the multiple instances of urban displacement by freeways in Los Angeles (Davis, 2001; Villa, 2000).

In my opinion, two recent Chicano/Latino/a films by ‘barrio people’ exemplify this tension around lowriders: *La Mission* (2010) directed by Peter Bratt, and *Machete* (2010) directed by Robert Rodriguez. In the first one, actor Benjamin Bratt stars as Che Rivera, a much-respected Latino man in the heart of the Mission District of San Francisco. As a previous inmate, a recovered alcoholic, and a recent widower, Che dedicates all his life to his son Jes, a high school senior. Che, a low-rider, is confronted with the reality that his son is gay. In this film, through Che’s involvement in the low-rider club, low-riders emerge as an extended family for him and his son, helping the characters balance life and achieve happiness. In an almost nostalgic approach, lowrider cars are symbolized as holders of people’s unique and

magnificent lives, replete with victories and struggles. As a *familia* that gathers at night, with the San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge as background, the images of the car club frame the context that holds each person grounded to their culture and values. At the end, Che learns to contend with his own demons and embraces his son. The last scene of the film depicts him driving a lowrider to UCLA to encounter Jes with his high school graduation gift — which is the lowrider Che is driving.

Alternatively, in the movie *Machete* (2010), director Robert Rodriguez approaches lowriders as exaggerated materializations of Anglo-American mainstream fears about Latinos. In this movie, a border Mexican Federal takes justice in his hands after experiencing and witnessing the dirty work of a corrupt politician and a sheriff in a desert southwest border state. In the movie, Latinos/Mexicans have built an underground network in order to retaliate against injustice. In the climax of the movie, blue-collar immigrants exemplified by gardeners, fast-food cooks, nannies and maids, revolt and utilize lowriders to break into the headquarters of Minute Men border-militia. Lowriders open the path by driving, smashing and killing the ‘bad guys’ with their hydraulics, jumping up and down on top of them. It is a grotesque and bloody scene, but because the film’s drama is so steeped in the irrationality of the anti-Latino sentiments and the context of AZ SB 1070 at the time of the film release, this gory scene is sarcastic and almost laughable. In this instance, lowrider cars are presented as apocalyptic monster machines that destroy, but that also liberate.



In both movies, lowriders become vehicles for transformation of the Chicana/Latina/o community, and they become instruments to grapple with internal and external evil forces, those of homophobia, machismo, street violence, as well as those of racism, xenophobia, and exploitation. The tensions between a nostalgic *pachuco* past, and the hardship of the present are never completely resolved (see Figure 18). However, in both cases, the notion of a better future, one based on equality and egalitarian relations is imagined and enacted around the practices of lowriding.

Certainly, lowriders as mere cars customarily can be framed as objects of consumer fetishism because of the extreme quantities of time, money, and energy devoted to their customization. As Prasad Boradkar (2010) explains in his book *Designing Things*, our relationship to objects varies within two extremes, between “possessive behaviors... and dispossessive behaviors” (p. 251). However, the amount of customizations in a lowrider car, including the detail to the setting and display of the car in a car show, can be interpreted as a way of collecting significations with a fetishistic attachment (p. 252) within the car. Therefore, the value of the lowrider is not defined by the reproduction/replacement of the car, but rather by social commerce (p.253) created around the practices of lowriding or the owner individual value (p. 254), and not necessarily by an exchange value as lowriders are not traded or exchanged. This understanding is especially crucial when lowrider cars are placed within the context of the traditionally disenfranchised Chicana/o community. In this way, lowriders

can turn into sites of subjugation by limiting vertical class mobility. Yet, ironically, they can also be, as I will argue here, sites for creating and expressing subversive epistemological scripts of self-definition and affirmation. Indeed, low/riders in the barrio 'drive' along a thin line between oppression and emancipation.

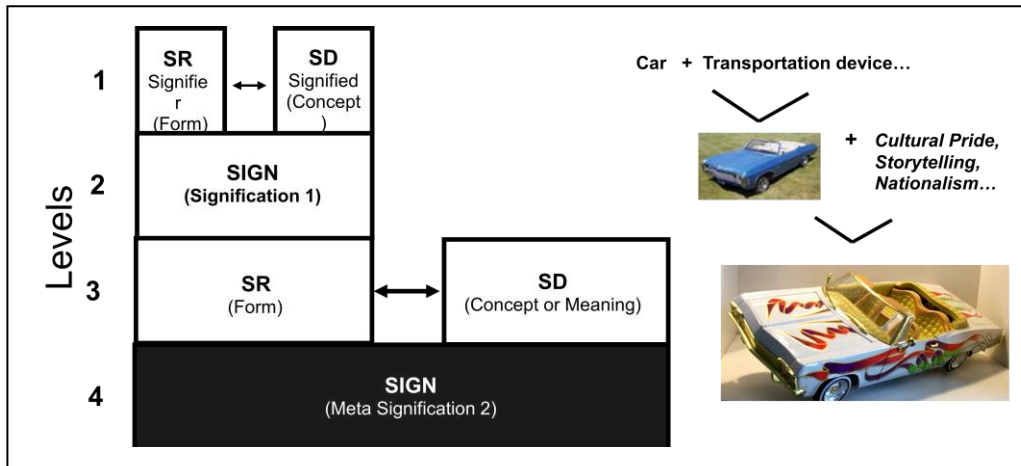


*Figure 18. The iconography of the pachuco, and the Zoot suiters are recurrent elements of the Low n' Slow' style, as an almighty past that define the performance of the present.*

Car re-appropriation by low-riders should be understood as asserting control over an object of iconic status. In this case, the adoption of a mainstream object is not limited to the value of the object itself or even by the fact of adoption, but it rather expands into an understanding of what this 'new' object is capable of re-signifying while subverting dominant social values (Cormack, 1997, p. 15-31). In semiotic terms, I am referring to the

multiple meta-significations of cars, and particularly lowriders where these significations are built as layers, one on top of the other.

In the end, the car functions as a means of transportation for lowriders, but only at the lowest level of the significations and values associated with lowriders. This facet remain as a core component of what defines a lowrider as a car. The next layer includes those significations that associate the car with industrialization and civility in the United States. Other layers of signification include the association of the car with the American Dream, and the transformation of the urban city and suburbia. The Chicana/o lowrider community adds new layers of signification by way of their experience of subjugation in a way that the car emerges as a medium for subversion and visual transgression, creating new meta-significations. In part the subversive role played by lowriders is based on their capacity to re-arrange significations and add new ones (see Figure 19) without losing track of the values that guide mainstream interpretations around cars. Further, such new significations allow for a level of familiarity and freshness that is simultaneously connected to a sense of insurgency and transgression — a sense that questions numerous mainstream assumptions regarding what is tasteful, proper, civilized, patriotic, etc.



*Figure 19. Low-riders are devices of semiotics because they add new signification levels (meta) without discarding the previous social constructed meanings and values. Mastering multiple systems of signification represents a characteristic of Borderland's habitants, such as Chicana/os.*

From the perspective of an oppressed community and as aesthetic expressions, low/riders question the entire superlative value ascribed to the Western's epistemologies of taste. I argue that a crucial point of understanding has been achieved that will allow progress in the understanding of low-riders and their use of color, framed by the discussion about the relationship between aesthetics and epistemologies. Therefore, it is important to dedicate time to understanding what we refer to as knowledge, alternative epistemologies, and borderland epistemologies concerning aesthetics and color. Our visual knowledge and our knowledge of taste allow us to validate judgments about 'good/bad.' On the one hand, such informed

awareness is deeply connected with how society approaches the material world, especially the built environment. However, it is also connected to the politics between center and periphery and the dynamics of social power. In order to contextualize the role of design criticism in regard to low/riders, it is important to review the power of the discourses on taste, how alternatives aesthetics/taste approaches are validated or rejected, and how they influence our design field.

### **La Frontera, Border Folklore, and the epistemic value of the vernacular.**

At a very basic level, the border or *la frontera* refers to the geopolitical boundary between the United States and Mexico. The border emerges as a long strip of natural and human-made spaces where both nations meet. In reality, however, *la frontera* is created by the overlap of multiple political, economic, and cultural realities transcending the mere physical border. In Chicana/o studies, it refers to the conglomerate of imaginary and real spaces where communal and individual experiences come to exist as a consequence of the enactment of power inequities around class, race, and gender between United States and Mexican states. As Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) indicates, “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch... with intimacy” (p. 19). For Anzaldúa, the border is a place constructed around such contradictory

notions as inclusion and exclusion, of safety and danger. For her, the border as an “unnatural boundary” defines a particular state of being; one of being outlawed. It is because these concepts (of duality and being outside the law) that *la frontera* as a socio-psychological space is constantly in transition, under revision and redefinition (p. 25).

In the attempt to explain the vast variety of ‘life’ that coexists and interacts everyday within *la frontera*, José David Saldívar (1997) in his book *Border Matters*, deploys a new term the “transfrontera contact zone” (p. 30) (inspired by Mary Louise Pratt). He explains how *la frontera* is more than just a long strip of land located along the border that separates the United States and Mexico but rather “the social space of subaltern encounters, the Janus-faced border line in which peoples geopolitically forced to separate now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics” (p. 14). *La Frontera* is a particular place, as José David Saldívar asserts, where a special alchemy happens. It is a capitalist generator of violence that transforms Mexican pesos into American dollars, where the very essence of the humanity of individuals is superseded by such categories as alien and illegal. *La frontera* is a place where *in between* culture is labeled as a “non-culture” by the mainstream (p. 8). In this case, the cultural borderlands become a place where cars as transportation devices can be transformed into mobile pieces of art and for which their function as repositories of expression becomes much more important than their use for mere transportation.

*La frontera* is a place that belongs wholly to neither country. It has a different identity all on its own because the norms and regulations that apply to the 'centers' may have little or no relevance at the border. As Ramón Saldívar (2006), contends in the *Borderlands of Culture*, the borderland is "a relatively coherent in-between region, a third space separate in many ways from Mexico and the United States" (p. 27) and yet simultaneously dominated and under siege from both countries (p. 8). *La frontera* is a new entity, a crossroads at the intersection of the power lines emanating from two colonial centers, Washington, D.C. and Mexico City.

Therefore, the U.S.-Mexico border is also an epistemological border where an accumulation of local knowledge confronts and negotiates with the 'dominant Euro-American epistemologies.' It is from this space of conflict, struggle, and negotiation that new epistemological realities emerge and new aesthetic paradigms emerge, in local cultural productions such as *corridos* and lowriders. It is in these borderlands that new third level or 'alternative' epistemologies are created and enacted. Certainly, as Mark Pizarro (1998) in *Chicana/o Power! Epistemologies and Methodology for Social Justice and Empowerment* argues that *corridos* are utilized to pass on the knowledge that emerged from the struggles of Chicana/os fighting oppression (p. 64).

For Ramón Saldívar (2006), "the borderlands are populated by transnational persons whose lives form an experiential field within which monologically delineated notions of political, social, and cultural identity simply do not suffice" (p. 17). In other words, the challenge for 'outside'

designers is not just that they may not completely comprehend the border and border productions. Rather, it may well be that many standard notions of how to study Chicana/o visual production at the border may limit our understandings of those productions. To be a borderland subject requires developing a unique set of specific epistemological values vital for survival. Therefore, border production's exploration requires a new corpus of research knowledge as well.

As Ramón Saldivar (2006) explains, these folk productions are holders of "border knowledge," and represent alternatives to modernity that are nonetheless deeply linked to the effects of modernity in the lives of borderland people (p. 17). More specifically, for Américo Paredes (1961), these border productions are forms of "vernacular knowledge" (p. 54) that function as "repositories of border knowledge from a subaltern perspective" (p. 55). In many cases, these border knowledge have not yet been translated into the traditional canonical knowledge forms of academia (p. 54). Such folk knowledge is linked to raw forms of cultural production.

Paredes understood these border folk productions to be as important as scholarly evidence because they provide a surviving record of the life conditions as experienced by subaltern communities (p. 54). Paredes (1982) does not stop there, however. For him, the study of folklore can allow one to discern a history different from the one maintained by the official culture (p. 1). This new history, he noted, is one that is still in progress right now, one that has not yet been corrupted, torn apart, or "mutilated by official



narratives of the nation” (Saldivar, 2006, p. 57). He considers that these folk vernacular knowledge productions are singularly characterized by their ‘unofficial’ status. They not only reveal the surviving records of an overtly subjugated community, but they also stand as visual evidence that other histories exist outside the official narratives or, in Dolores Delgado Bernal’s phrase, as histories that are “not visible from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation” (2002, p.113).

The notion of folklore as a counter-narrative to the discourses of modernity (Saldivar, 2006, p. 55) allows Paredes to perceive the borderlands as a space in progress, constantly adapting and adjusting, always maneuvering within the terrains of subalternity. For Paredes, one of the great characteristics of folklore is its ability to present a worldview that is not prim and proper, strictly arranged, centralized, or predictable, but quite differently, one that is pragmatic and open to multiple possibilities and alliances, one that is sometimes contradictory but nonetheless always committed to truth (p. 55).

It is this recognition of folk border productions, as an expression of “vernacular local knowledge,” (p. 55) outside official epistemological discourses that is pivotal, for example, in Paredes’ work on *corridos* and legends. He asserts that the experience of the border cannot be located in “traditional” documents, but it can be found in vernacular narratives such as *corridos*, music and prose, as they pass from one generation to another. Furthermore, Paredes (1961) contends that a comprehensive mapping of the

history of the border cannot exist without including folklore (p. 32), especially because as he describes it, “folklore remembers, but not as [official] history remembers; folklore works by ‘building its own timeless world out of the wreck of history’” (p. 58). This concept of the timeless and memory in ‘border vernacular’ expressions is particularly important for understanding how folk productions such as lowriders negotiate and create alternative ‘spaces’ of memory while simultaneously incorporating multiple (and even contradictory) styles in order to narrate a counter-history of the borderland.

Paredes’ arguments show that *la frontera* and many of its folk productions are contradictory endeavors. These can be analyzed as examples of Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, in that they are “capable of juxtaposing in a real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (p. 25). In this case, the vernacular *frontera* as a *heterotopia* becomes a space where seemingly irreconcilable realities are able to coexist simultaneously. As Foucault (1986) says, the role of heterotopia “...is to create a space of illusion... create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (p. 25). In this case, border productions, such as lowriders, work also to create an imaginary space that is a counter creation of the crude realities of *la frontera*’s geopolitics.

Paredes’ arguments about how folklore remembers, aligns his thinking close to Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas about how culturally charged spaces

and places are so often also collective sites of *memory permeated with what he calls “materials memory”* (1981, p. 283). Commenting on Bakhtin’s work in *Rabelais and His Word* (1941) where he expressed his views on the carnivalesque and memory, George Lipsitz (2001) explains how words and signs retain and “contain ideological traces from the past that take on renewed significance when they are appropriated in the present” (p. 16). Furthermore, as sites for the carnivalesque, border vernacular productions such as corridos, lowriders are capable of subverting many of the assumptions of dominant narratives through their recycling, customizations, humor, and chaotic order. Border vernacular productions become sites where retelling and constructing another narrative outside normative history questions the myth of epistemological continuity imposed by the dominant culture.

Delgado Bernal (2002) elaborates on the role that border vernacular productions play in transferring knowledge. She notes that cultural productions such as corridos, legends, myths, and storytelling (p. 113) enable subjugated communities to pass their experiences of victory, resiliency, and resistance to younger generations. According to her, these border folk productions are sites for telling an ‘unofficial’ history as well as for remembering ‘another’ history, one based on hope and the victories of everyday life. In this case, the vernacular becomes the place to retell the history of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in their day-to-day experiences (Geist and Nachbar, 1983, p. 5). Yet, Delgado Bernal is very

careful to acknowledge that these cultural venues can be also used to perpetuate and impose oppressive practices such as homophobia, racist segregation, and sexism. As a solution to these contradictions and antagonisms, she makes an appeal precisely for rescuing the ancestral knowledge that has guided oppressed communities (p. 113).

Vernacular cultural productions also create a time of pleasure, celebration, and display outside of historical time, outside of the demands of the workweek, outside of the official history of national citizenship, and outside of the logic of commodity production and accumulation. Chicana/o cultural production plays multiple roles. By the use of aesthetics and customizations, the space of lowriding becomes a new place for distraction, a safe cultural locus, and an alternative academy that I call auto-academia, deploying a pun that underscores how lowriding utilizes the automobile as a vehicle to learn and pass knowledge about their history, their current reality and the possibilities for the future.

Folk border productions, such as corridos, legends and lowriders demonstrate the grandiosity of borderland subjects' resistance and resilience. These cultural productions can be understood as holders of a community history of injuries, challenges, and deceptions, but also as archives of struggles and triumphs. They display knowledge, skills, and desires through technologies of everyday survival and resistance.

## **The Core of Border Aesthetics: The Epistemological Value of Camp and *Rasquachismo*.**

The border/*la frontera* is a distinctive space, a place where cultural productions are imbued with unique epistemological qualities. Aesthetics and the world of the visual work together to manifest this border “vernacular knowledge” (Paredes, 1961, p. 54) specifically in the context of Chicana/o folk production. What José Limón defines as the “political semiotic” is crucial for understanding the full implications of the cultural, social, and political work performed by low/riders. As artist Guillermo Gómez (1986) in *Border Culture: A Process of Negotiation Toward Utopia* explains, in the borderlands, people are engaging in a unique experiment of creating a ‘new’ visual language skillful enough to coherently express their extraordinary geopolitical and cultural experiences (p. 1-6). The imperative of creating a new language emerges from the limitations of the ‘official’ visual language to express comprehensively the realities of border subjects. A new visual language develops from border thinking that generates new aesthetic knowledge that exists in, but also moves beyond, Euro-American epistemologies (Grosfoguel, 2005, p. 23). It is at the border that new forms of objects are generated by the mutation, merging, and customization of the objects from the center. These new objects-beings come to exist when they are not longer able to fit the needs people. When an object is incapable of reproducing the current system, a rupture is generated, and people recreate new things.

As a generative aesthetic site, the border works to de-center dominant aesthetic discourses and to create new places for self-valorization. Tomás Rivera (1971) argues that in the realm of aesthetics there are three main pillars that define the mission of Chicano border subjects: representing their reality, conserving their identity, and destroying whatever misinformed inventions others have created about them (p. x). These three elements are crucial to understanding low-rider approaches to car production and customization. Therefore, border aesthetics not only generate new subjectivities, but also contest and replace old ones.

It is in this complex reality of the border, that Gómez-Peña (1986) argues that a particular kind of artist has emerged, one that “has been forced to develop multidimensional roles, [...] not just an image maker or a marginal genius, but a social thinker/educator/counter journalist/civilian diplomat/human rights observer” (p. 6). The geopolitics of the border not only requires a new semiotic language, but it also necessitates a new type of artist armed with a unique set of epistemological tactics that are capable of deciphering exceptional circumstances (p. 6). This multiplicity of roles played by visual art in the borderlands enables Chicana/os to fight visual forced enculturation by changing points of semiotic reference. In a space defined by daily and historic struggle, Chicana/os advance their ideas and interests through artistic production. Aesthetics serves the role of activism, because these artists and cultural producers utilize the visual as a tool to contest, challenge, negotiate, and create new identities. Many scholars

(including A. Chabram-Dernersesian, 2006; T. Ybarra-Frausto, 1991; R. García, 2006; A. Mesa-Bains, 1996; L. Pérez, 2007) have worked toward conceptualizing the visual language particular to *la frontera*. They have done so especially with respect to concepts of locality, race, class, gender, space, time, mobility of resources, and sexual orientation. One crucial concept directly relevant to lowrider aesthetics is that of *rasquachismo* or *rasquache*.

The term *rasquache* is an appropriation of a term used in Mexico, clearly of *Nahuatl* origin, to describe someone of a lower class. Traditionally, it connotes tackiness, bad taste, and even vulgarity. In her book, *Chicano Folklore*, Rafaela Castro (2001), defines *rasquache* as someone “funky, humble, unsophisticated” (p. 198). The word entered American academic circles when Chicana/o scholars started employing it to illuminate the particularities of border aesthetics. This kind of re-appropriation of a derogatory term as a tool for empowering purposes is a common practice of self-valorization within subjugated groups. In this case, *rasquachismo* became a term to explain the sensibility and aesthetic characteristics of border productions by Chicana/os.

In the context of Chicana/o visual language, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1991) introduces the term *rasquache*, as a style “rooted in Chicano structures of thinking, feeling, and aesthetic choice. It is one form of Chicano vernacular, the verbal-visual codes... that encode a comprehensive worldview” (p. 155). For Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* is a worldview marked by the experience of subjugation and the peripheral nature of

Chicana/o existence inside modernity. As an expression from “los de abajo” or the underdogs, *rasquachismo* is highly ingrained with elements of adaptability, survivability, inventiveness, recycling, and ingenuity (p. 156). Ybarro-Frausto explains that *rasquachismo* is a collective aesthetic defined by class, an expression of a “have-not” existence (p. 156), one that comes to exist in part as an answer to an oppressed reality and as a way to reclaim one’s humanity in the face of it (p. 157). He explains that *rasquachismo* is characterized strongly by its resourcefulness, by the discovery and use of the most appropriate resources available in order to survive (p. 157).

Consequently, *rasquachismo* is often a kind of collage that tends to privilege hybridization, juxtaposition and the integration of multiple and apparently unsuitable and incommensurable styles and aesthetics all at once. In this sense, *rasquachismo* as border production constructs a different timeline, one where history is not measured by linear chronology, but rather by a creative reconfiguring of temporality through ephemera and the lived experiences of the community. This new approach to temporality favors the intersection of multiple icons, images, and graphics from different historical periods and different social groups to coexist in one canvas, without compromising their aesthetic value.

In her essay *Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache*, Amalia Mesa-Bains (1996) explains how *rasquachismo* is more than just an aesthetic style created for the sake of beauty. *Rasquachismo* is a highly political concept, since it allows Chicana/os to resist forced enculturation at



the same time that it lets them promote dignity and positive self-portrayal (p. 5). In this case, *rasquache* aesthetic interventions and customizations, such as lowriders or *corridos*, cannot be disassociated from the economic, social, and political inequality experienced in the borderlands. Mesa-Bains (1996) claims *rasquachismo* allows Chicana/os “the capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado” (p. 5). It is this audacity of *rasquachismo* that leads Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) to describe it also in terms of sarcasm, irony, and mockery. Furthermore, as she explained in *Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master’s House*, the ironic capacity of *rasquachismo* derives from its quality of transforming “utilitarian articles into sacred or aesthetic objects, highly metaphoric” (1998, p. 11-12) — just as may be seen in the case of lowriders.

For Mesa-Bains (1996), *rasquachismo* is a *modus operandi* that involves a deep understanding of the border reality, of history, and social life marked by subjugation and oppression. It manifests itself not only in the aesthetic work of art production, but also in interpretations of space and its social uses, in the recreation and re-appropriation of objects, as well as in definitions of what is perceived as useful and beautiful. *Rasquachismo* transforms ordinary objects into sacred ones, into metaphors for resistance and resiliency (p. 11).

There is a tendency in cultural criticism to fuse *rasquachismo* with kitsch and/or camp. The pairing of kitsch with *rasquachismo* happens

primarily because mainstream culture generally deploys a top-down perspective that reductively simplifies and homogenizes Border folk practices in order to de-valorize their significance and unrealistically maintain the current epistemic center. Gaspar de Alba (1998) notes that from the perspective of the dominant Euro-American culture, kitsch must be framed as an aesthetic style based on the vernacular world of the working class (p. 12). Yet, she is clear that kitsch is not a translation or an example of *rasquachismo* (p. 12).

There is something else to kitsch other than its 'vernacular' content. She proposes that the term kitsch connotes a process of appropriation external in many ways to the author, while *rasquachismo* serves as an expression of a "barrio sensibility" (p. 12), that comes from a socially situated aesthetic consciousness of differentiation. *Rasquachismo* is certainly linked to the Mexican reality but it is dislocated and repositioned in "El Norte" *la frontera*, (the United States' border) outside Mexico. *Rasquachismo* as a style happens in the many venues of the border: in the physical, the imaginary, the spiritual, and the sexual. It is neither exclusively Anglo nor Mexican, but shares elements of each. Craft productions coexist with mass consumption but are still able to present idiosyncratic styles. As Mesa-Bains (1996) explains, its distinctive elements can be found in its genesis in a *worldview* from a de-centered position.

Mesa-Bains identifies the crucial distinction between *rasquachismo* and kitsch. She brings into the equation the barrio's sensibility and

sociopolitical awareness. This is what differentiates *rasquachismo* from camp or kitsch productions, a consciousness of emancipated or at least oppositional otherness with respect to mainstream culture, even when using mainstream materials. In other words, *rasquachismo* exudes a sense of self-affirmation in the face of mainstream condescension and dismissal. It discerns the survival strategies of an aggrieved people inside eclectic mixtures of styles and creative redeployments and reconfigurations of the devalued commodities of consumer culture.

Furthermore, as Ybarra-Frausto (1991) argues, *rasquachismo*<sup>17</sup> emerges as an “aesthetic call for ethnic redemption and social resurrection through the concepts of *Fregado pero no jodido* (Be down, but not out)” (p. 157). The aesthetics of the border enable Chicana/os to invert and subvert forms of knowledge and prestige hierarchies created about and around them.

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<sup>17</sup> Ramón García (2006) has a different view of *rasquachismo* than the one I present here. He argues that Chicano aesthetics can be explained not in terms of a *rasquache* style but rather from the perspective of camp. He argues that, “fundamentally, *rasquache* at its core is a style that has been defined and institutionalized by middle-class Chicano art critics.” For him, a dilemma arises in part because Chicano art critics have “to a certain extent removed [themselves] from the reality of *rasquachismo*. The problem is that *rasquache* promoters do not acknowledge the distance that is there between a *rasquache* aesthetic and their own everyday lives.” For García, the fact the middle-class Chicano art critics try to position *rasquachismo* as an external experience exemplifies its limitations, and the association of *rasquachismo* with *bourgeois nostalgia*. As a response to this, García argues that, “camp in Chicano culture involves a much more conscious and critical representation,” one that takes in consideration also market components such as consumption and value. In addition, García argues that camp is by its own nature “confrontational” and “while a *rasquache* aims at affirmation, a Chicano camp aesthetic aim at criticizing and problematizing Chicano culture from within.” In this case, camp emerges as a border discourse that can question not only outside “Eurocentered” aesthetics conceptions of beauty but also those created and reproduced at the inside of the Chicana/o community (p. 211-23).

*Rasquachismo* works also as a means of envisioning a “fantastic” future right here and right now, even within the horrors of being “fregado” (p. 157).

*Rasquachismo* as an epistemological framework provides the grounds for creating and sustaining a distinctive cultural identity apart from the one proposed by mainstream, and one simultaneously allowing for the enactment of a socio-political movement of emancipation (Mesa-Bains, 1996, p. 5). For Ybarra-Frausto (1991), *rasquachismo* as a resistant aesthetic style, by its mere existence, rejects and questions dominant notions of what is proper and correct. He argues that *rasquachismo* deploys an array of cultural technologies of resistance (Ybarra-Frausto, p. 158) meant to validate oneself and the community as a whole. One of its aesthetic strategies is its quality of attaching self-affirming meanings to historically oppressive symbols (p. 158).

In *rasquachismo*, symbols used to oppress can be expropriated and re-contextualized in order to signify a distinctive historical path. Therefore, as a vernacular aesthetic movement, *rasquachismo* can be perceived as the border fighting back against elite impositions and universal standards proposed by modernity. It is within this new semiotic context that Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) explains how *rasquachismo* is “more than an oppositional form; it is a militant praxis of resistance to hegemonic standards in the art world” (p. 12). As she observes, its innovative power comes from its unapologetic and bold move of turning upside down the ruling paradigms used in aesthetic and visual domination (p. 12). By doing this, *rasquachismo* has the capacity to remap the lines of power and redirect them.

Therefore, *rasquachismo* moves beyond the mere act of self-valorization of Chicana/os existence. It also achieves epistemological relevance by redefining canonical notions of what is art, or at least what is validated as art. Through the implementation of *rasquachismo* as aesthetic activism, spheres of knowledge are newly redefined and new centers are drafted within 'border thinking,' through what I call aesthetic border praxis. It is precisely this praxis toward social change that constitutes the basis for inquiring into the epistemological power of 'vernacular' aesthetics, when these aesthetics are put into practice by subjugated/oppressed communities such as Chicana/os, blacks, and/or queers.

### **On the Praxis of Camp as an Epistemology in Marginalized Communities**

John Binnie (1997) in *Coming Out of Geography: Toward a Queer Epistemology* has studied the value of camp aesthetics as a site for knowledge production and as a repository of collective knowledge in his work on queer communities. At the most basic level, camp as an epistemology has to do with the particular role-played by aesthetics in non-normative communities, its utility as a means to differentiate and reaffirm their unique experiences of subjugation. Binnie claims that because of their experience of marginalization, queer individuals created by heterosexism, are forced to develop a distinctive vision, one quite outside the dominant constraints of the normative gaze (p. 227). Camp, in this case, exemplifies the unique

standpoint vision that queer subjects develop in order to make sense of their condition and to challenge heterosexual and hetero-normative ways of perceiving reality.

In order to advance the definitional understanding of queer individuals, it is important to note that the term 'queer' not only represents 'sexual minorities,' but it refers also those individuals, communities, and knowledge production[s] that "challenge normative systems and discursive practices" (Arrizón, 2006, p. 3) of the mainstream. As Alicia Arrizón (2006) proposes, the term queer can play different roles: first as a means of-exposing a diverging point of view from what is normative; and second to recognize a sense of difference that emerges from been marginalized (p. 3). In this case, queering calls for non-forced enculturation, demystification, subversion, and challenging many of the 'natural,' 'common,' and 'straight' assumptions of modernity. Non-normative subjects, independently of their sexual preferences or orientation, exemplify the existence of multiple unfixed, and mobile centers of self-identity outside prescribed networks of power. Under this definition, queer as a non-conforming outsider category can be applied to a vast array of individuals, communities and cultural practices, not because of the sexual affiliation or self-identification of their participants, but rather by their ability to "disassemble" normative systems and "to build an alternative reality" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 196).

Binnie (1997) explains that the epistemological value of camp is not limited to art production, but also entails the interpretation and redefinition

of hegemonic discourses of taste and beauty. He says, “camp can make us see that what art and media give us are not the *Truth* or *Reality*, but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings of the way life is” (p. 229). In this case, camp, just like *rasquachismo*, provides a venue for re-conceptualizing aesthetic knowledge about our realities in a way that questions the prevailing ‘common sense’ of taste and what is beauty. At the same time, Binnie also tries to pull away from a pure aesthetic framework, expanding the notion of camp into a ground of resistance and a mechanism for the creation of counter spaces for self-affirmation. For him, camp works also as the space where queer people contest the rigid constraints of modernity, not only aesthetically but also morally. Camp redefines the grounds used to situate pleasure.

This interpretation of camp is very similar to the arguments proposed by Tomás Ybarra Frausto (1991) and Gaspar de Alba (1998) about *rasquache* as an aesthetic “militant praxis” against modernity. Binnie (1997) contends that camp creates safe spaces where individuals can escape from the rigid limitations and restrictions (p. 231) of modernity. Camp allows the existence of differences, as a valuable feature for those that traditionally have not fit within the prescribed norms of society, such as gay/lesbians, Blacks, Chicana/os, women and other social groups generally identified as minorities. He contends that camp can be seen very much as a moral practice, since it validates difference in a society that tends to dismiss and disqualify those who diverge from and do not conform to dominant norms.

Here camp emerges as the means to express the uniqueness of subaltern experiences. As Binnie observes, through the enactment of camp, queer dissidents can recognize each other, and by grouping together around camp protect themselves. These 'safe zones' are areas where subjugated subjects can relax temporarily from their constant burden of surveillance (p. 230). Camp, in this case distances gays and lesbians from homophobia by unifying queer communities. It creates a safe space for non-normative social groups to survive. It works as means to fight the toxic effects created by the enactment of epistemologies of ignorance and injustice against aggrieved communities.

Very similarly, José Esteban Muñoz (1999) contends that camp must be contextualized beyond the limiting realms of representation by understanding how it allows self-empowerment against the pressures of rejection by the dominant culture (p. 120). As he explains, camp, more than kitsch, works as an "outing" component for queer "sexual minorities" and is linked with a "survival mode of identity" (Muñoz, p. 121) that is performed openly in a context of a naturalized phobic state. In this case, queer people utilize camp as a means to 'out themselves' from the restrictive normalized-self created by mainstream culture. The aesthetics of camp creates spaces that allows for differences to become visible. In this case, *rasquachismo* as a unique aesthetic manifestation for Chicana/os can be understood within the realms of survival and reaffirmation, because it creates spaces where non-normativity can exist explicitly.



*Rasquachismo* and camp work as tactics for resisting and fighting phobia as well as racism by creating safe spaces for performance. It is through camp that a new non-phobic state can be envisioned and recreated. As Muñoz (1999) explains, through the performance of camp aesthetics, queer people do more than just question and dissect what is normative, correct, appropriate, or expected in modernity; they can “disassemble” those notions, using their parts to build an alternative reality (p. 196). Dissident subjects use “the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world” (p. 196). In many cases, *rasquachismo* can be interpreted as a means to recreate an alternative world to the adverse reality experienced by Chicanos, which I refer in our next section “A car Tune-up: Building New Spaces” (p. 191) as the *recreation of Aztlán*<sup>18</sup>.

Lowriders become sites to deal with reality, and to imagine a new world with the use of aesthetics and car performance. It is because of *rasquachismo* that *chusmería*<sup>19</sup> the aesthetic of ‘los de abajo’ is re-signified not as a toxic identity, but instead as an emergent (p. 196) oppositional counter-reality.

From the perspective of Chicana/os as borderland subjects, and the study of their vernacular folk productions, understanding how camp works in queer communities is very important. Certainly, it is not implied here that social disparities generated by race, class, and citizenship can be flattened to

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<sup>18</sup> Refers to the early definition of the concept of *Aztlán* on page 4 of this document.

<sup>19</sup> *Chusmería* comes from the derogatory term *chusma*, used to define “lowlife” or sleazy in Mexico and many parts of Latin America.

equalize those subjugations organized by sexual orientation, desire, and/or gender performance. On the contrary, it is because each one of these categories can be used to discriminate against different subjects, that an understanding of how queer or non-normative communities resist, fight, and negotiate their condition allows us to understand affinities and connections among differently positioned aggrieved social groups. Camp as a counter-discourse to modernity provides a model for conceptualizing the role that aesthetic interventions play within oppressed communities, particularly concerning *rasquachismo*.

For Binnie (1997), camp like *rasquache* is not a new kind of uniformity but rather a rejection of the lures and confines of sameness. It is a space where multiple styles can coexist and flourish. Aesthetic diversity is an essential element of camp since it comes precisely from a divergent point that rejects the sameness and uniformity of the mainstream. As explained before, camp's power emerges preeminently by the affiliation and creative recombination among diverse styles, materials, shapes, time periods, and signs. Binnie proposes that camp also works as an outing mechanism that can make someone's subjugated status visible. In this case, the epistemological value of camp is framed by its broadcasting function, its ability to 'speak' unapologetically. Here, visibility becomes possible because there is a common sharing of codes through which camp operates.

Binnie relates, "a camp person knows his or her taste is a give-away to others in the know" (p. 153). In this sense, camp turns invisibility into

visibility. Camp is a language that offers a visual identity (p. 153), because it works as a means to recognize others and to define people in or outside of what is normative. That is why “epistemology must be informed by camp” (p. 230), not as a marginal way of knowing but as strategic system for knowing and sharing knowledge. Therefore, camp as an invisible archive informs and reaffirms subaltern identities and epistemologies. The sharing and recognition of camp aesthetic practices enables previously subjugated and devalued realms of knowledge to be repositioned at the center of border subjects’ experience (p. 230).

#### **LOWRIDERS AS BORDER VERNACULAR KNOWLEDGE**

Four main arguments have been brought together so far to support the study of lowriders as expressions of Chicana/o epistemologies: 1) Automobiles are important in the construction of American identity and as metaphors of modernity; 2) systems of knowing emerge from lived experiences, and social oppression and discrimination produce multiple epistemic points of reference; 3) the U.S.-Mexico border, *la frontera*, is a geopolitical space of encounter and contradiction that generates new epistemologies in the form of “vernacular knowledge” (Paredes, 1961, p. 54) as holders of memory and as alternative narrative modules; 4) border aesthetics operate through *rasquache* as a specific Chicana/o expression that deploys aesthetics to ‘out’ one’s own subjugated status, reinforce community

unity and awareness, resist and negotiate modernist alienation, and display alternative standpoints.

In the next section, I will confront these theoretical points in regard to the cultural practice of lowriding, with particular focus given to lowriders as an example of border knowledge. Here again, four main criteria will be utilized to analyze lowriders: 1) their *rasquache* quality of “fregado pero no jodido (down but not out)” (Barnet-Sanchez, 2005, p. 92), which allows Chicana/os to voice the subjugated status while allowing for self-affirmative practices of “auto-valorization;” 2) the role of lowriders as holders of memories and ideas that build unity and cohesion in their community; 3) their construction of a non-linear temporality that functions outside of imposed notions of history yet speaks a counter-narrative of the border; and 4) the ways in which all of these components work together to build and envision a ‘fantasy’ world.

### ***Navigating the City: Memory and Time.***

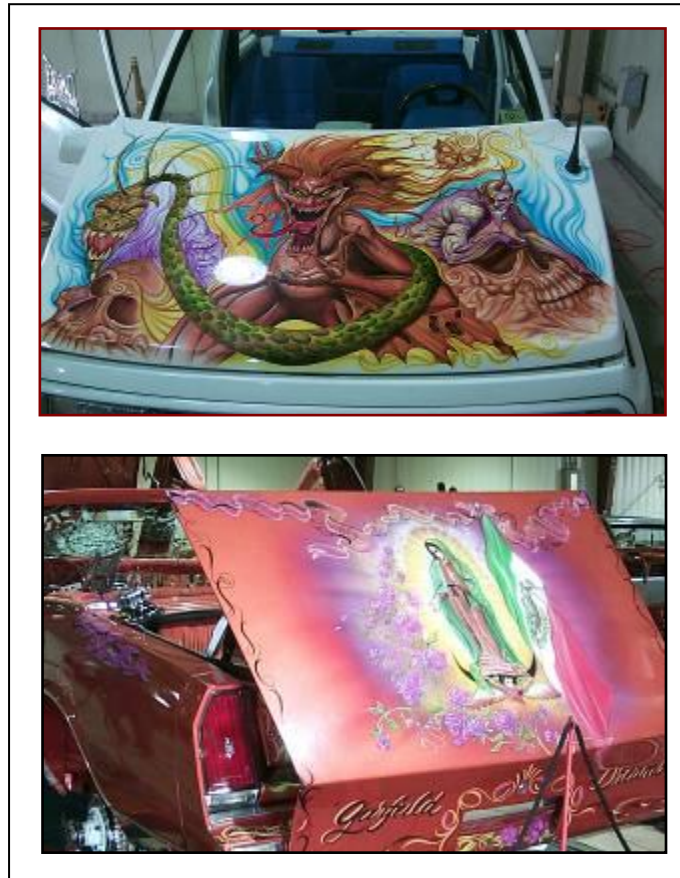
According to Paredes, border vernacular productions contain the memories of a community. They are embodiments of a ‘raw’ historical archive that conforms to a different timeline from that of mainstream history. Border productions, as communal forms of collective knowledge (Morgan, 1998, p. 48), work as mechanisms to prevent forgetting (R. Saldívar, 2006, p. 12), and as a means to rebuke the epistemic “ignorance” of the mainstream against subjugated communities (p. 15). Brenda Jo Bright and Linda Bakewell

(1995) in *Looking High and Low* observe that lowrider customizations subvert mainstream car categories and also “inscribe personal visions and memories onto their vehicles” (p. 107). Customizations and graphics work together to transform the car into a storyteller, a narrator of experiences. The history recounted in the cars, however, is reconstructed not by reproducing the official time line, but rather by retelling of historical events, one that reframes the work of representation (Morgan, 1998, p. 48). For low-riders, memory as a collective act involves the entire community, creators of the cars as well as the viewing spectators.

Through the use of multiple, contradictory, and even antagonistic images, lowriders broadcast a history of oppression and resistance. They challenge and transform the images and ideas mainstream consumer culture creates; furthermore, they accomplish this by challenging distinctions between public and private spaces. For low-riders, driving in the city becomes a means of telling their stories to the masses, outside the limitations imposed by the city itself. (Chappell, 2001, p. 10) Low-rider aficionados therefore situate their ‘unofficial’ new lines of speech outside the regular channels of mainstream history.

It is precisely because of these two qualities that they can juxtapose multiple images such as “football teams... musicians like Selena... medieval knights, Aztec warriors... Marilyn Monroe and cartoons” (Chappell, 2001, p. 10). These images coexist simultaneously, without interrupting or compromising the overall message (see Figure 20) in time or space. The low-

riders' narrative is relevant not because of its accuracy in telling a chronology of events in a systematic order, but rather in its quality of suggesting that all these 'unrelated' events, even contradictory ones, work together in the construction of border realities and narratives.



*Figure 20. Two examples of lowriders displaying two different images: a composition of devils and the Virgin of Guadalupe, coexisting side by side in the same lowrider car show.*

Even when the images of warriors and Aztec princesses do not properly represent the 'true' depiction of historical events, they do not

become less real, but rather actually supra-real within the context of the “Transnational Imaginary” (R. Saldívar, 2006, p. 61) proposed by Paredes (1982) and Ramón Saldívar (2006). Updated and reconfigured versions of the Aztec legacy as semiotic alternatives that negotiate the real and the imaginary (p. 61) in a way that allows low-riders to reorganize, regroup, and revalue the forces (p. 61) that have defined their social reality of today. In this case, lowriders become sites for enhanced political consciousness as they create an aggregated rupture between the past and present by rearranging the chronological order of images and enabling all of them to exist simultaneously. Furthermore, it is precisely because Chicana/os and low-riders have long experience with limited access to traditional means of communication that these alternative lines of speech are initially put in place. Following Ybarra-Frausto’s analysis of *rasquachismo*, we can say that these counter-discourses are not based only in (a) the disruption in the ‘venues’ selected to communicate a message, or (b) in ‘how’ that message is conveyed, nor even (c) in the ‘order’ of that narrative, but also by (d) their ability to control *what* message is communicated about them.

Low-riders construct new narratives that transgress mainstream portrayals of Chicanos as social burdens, i.e., as lazy or violent people, into narratives that portray them as individuals within a culture who are in control of their own future, destiny and, most of all, self-representation. This is related to what Tomás Ybarra Frausto (1991) defines as the quality of *rasquache* productions, to express the point of view from “*los de abajo*.” In

this case, by telling the story through the eyes of “*los de abajo*” and recounting the events as they affect them, lowriders work as memory holders but with a new worldview, with a different standpoint marked by their subjugation rather than a focus on their defeats. New knowledge and understanding about what happens to their community are reprocessed and passed on (see Figure 21).

However, low-riders are not only using ‘non-traditional’ means to communicate their story on their own terms; they are also building new semiotic codes for reading preexisting images individually and collectively (Bright and Bakewell, 1995, p. 109). For at least the last three decades, low-riders have used highly sexualized female figures in their imagery, steeped almost exclusively in the scope of heterosexual desire from a male gaze. The sexism depicted in these images reinforces male privilege and power. Yet, as María Herrera-Sobek (1993) shows in her understanding of *corridos*, “there is nothing inherently male in the *corrido* or its structure.... It is only a fact of [patriarchal] history... that the majority of *corridos* have been written by males” (p. xviii). Women have participated in *corridos*; they have written and performed them. It is a product of patriarchy that women have been relegated, segregated, and deleted from *corridos*’ history. Equally, I do not define low-riders as a “male genre... but as a male-dominated genre” (p. xviii) where women’s roles in lowrider culture have been defined by patriarchal practices that perceive and center automobiles as a male object.



Since its early beginning, many women have participated in lowriding, both as car owners and/or as ‘companions’ to their lowrider boyfriends and husbands. An early example of the emergence of female lowrider collectives is exemplified by the *Fortunettes* in Orange County, California during the 1960s. Later, in the 1970s, Whittier Boulevard in Los Angeles saw the emergence of formally organized female clubs, like the *Dukettes* (a branch of the *Dukes*, a lowrider car club) and the *Lady Bugs* (Penland, 2003, para 4). Over time, women have joined the ranks of traditional car clubs, or have created their own individual car clubs. For example, several national car clubs have now opened full membership to women, in which is the case for *The Majestics* and *Impalas Car Club*. One of the current female car clubs, is *Ladies’ Touch*, located in Mesa, Arizona. Nevertheless, women participation in lowriding as car members has been limited by rigid patriarchal practices of exclusion.

Denise Sandoval (2003) has linked the misrepresentation of women in lowriding to the promotional practices of *Lowrider Magazine* during the 1980s (Gaspar, 2003, p. 179-196). She has been able to call the attention on the symbolic, visual, and epistemic violence experienced by females as a consequence of patriarchal structures and practices in low/riders. In order to understand the complexity of lowriders visual production, it is essential to frame them within the visual landscape of the border as a place where multiple points of reference retain the potential to shift.



*Figure 21. Photo of a lowrider car with a representation of an ideal past, as a practice against forgetting. Note the arrangement of different historical events in order to construct a personalized past, in this case around a mythical Aztlán, as well as the ties constructed with heterosexual interpretation of history.*

At the same time that the oppression of women is rejected, we should not dismiss the possibility that representations of sensuality might signal a desire to achieve power, to disturb, and to make a subversive statement. This hyper-heterosexuality, which can be so destructive in everyday life, might also represent a rebellion against alienated labor and the bodily repressions it requires. Informed by the rigid sexual norms imposed on Chicana/os that force them to live between an ideal-unrealistic Puritanism, on one hand, and over-sexualized stereotypes, on the other, it may be that low-riders fight back against these sexual norms by unrepentantly reproducing sexually

affirmative images. Moreover, sensuality is a great equalizer; something that at least in theory is equally unattainable and desirable by all. From a heterosexual point of view, low-riders create a hyper-masculinity that is unattainable, unreal, fantastic, and based on desire, something similar to the images created by Tom of Finland within the gay community. The line between emancipation and oppression are not always clear and more research needs to be done.

Low-riders thus present themselves as the only ones truly living a 'sexual liberation' from modernism. In this case, overtly sexualized images displayed 'in your face' may emerge as means for social revenge. However, even after positing this representation, it is essential to recognize the toxic effects that these images produce by presenting a narrow heterosexual approach to sexuality that supports and glorifies the objectification of women, and that reinforces the male gaze as the singular and privileged point of reference.

These images that come to exist within the context of the border and its multiple tactics in place for knowledge subjugation contain multiple contradictions. I am not implying that low-riders are more sexualized or more sexist than any other group. Because of the ambivalent nature of the borderlands, however, sexuality can act as a force for subjugation when used 'narrowly' and as a source of emancipation (for the creators of the images and the community they represent) when used subversively. For example, many Chicana artists have utilized similar tactics to promote emancipation

and liberation for women through their murals, paintings, sculptures, and altar installations (Pérez, 2007). In the work of painters Yolanda Lopez, Ester Hernandez, and Alma Lopez, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is used subversively in order to disturb the dichotomies of virginal/whore imposed on Latina women. The artists create ambiguous and confrontational representations of the Virgin Mary by presenting her as an everyday person, with sexual desires and/or engaged in emotional relationships with others. The Virgin is relocated as sharing the lives and struggles of regular people, for example, by engaging in a queer love, or by being embodied as part of the artist or the community. A conscious shift in the intention and goal of sexuality and sensuality allows these Chicana artists to subvert and transform their realities (see Figure 22).

The work of Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004) on Puerto Rico's masculinity can be useful in contextualizing the use of erotic images in lowriders. In her opinion, two factors have contributed to how hetero-masculinity is performed and manifested in Puerto Rican popular culture today. The first one is linked to their long history of conquests and defeats, first from Spain and later from the United States, and the historical weakness of the island's anti-colonial liberation movement. The second factor concerns their current unresolved status as a 'colonial territory,' existing in pronounced contradiction as a non-state and as a non-independent nation. For Negrón-Muntaner (2004), these two factors have been determinate in the construction of a mainstream notion that "imposes" and "implies" some

kind of unspoken effeminacy of Puerto Rican males. As she explains, the need to recreate a hyper-masculine Puerto Rican has been central to the constitution of Puerto Rico's nationalist project (p. 33-57) and it is based on a fear of the "black faggot" (p. 57). Furthermore, she connects this Puerto Rican fear to another similar colonial outcome in the Mexican culture defined by the concept of the "*Hijos de la Chingada*" or the descendents of *La Malinche*. In both cases, she interprets them as directly connected to the shame of the traitor and the alleged creation of alliances with invaders.

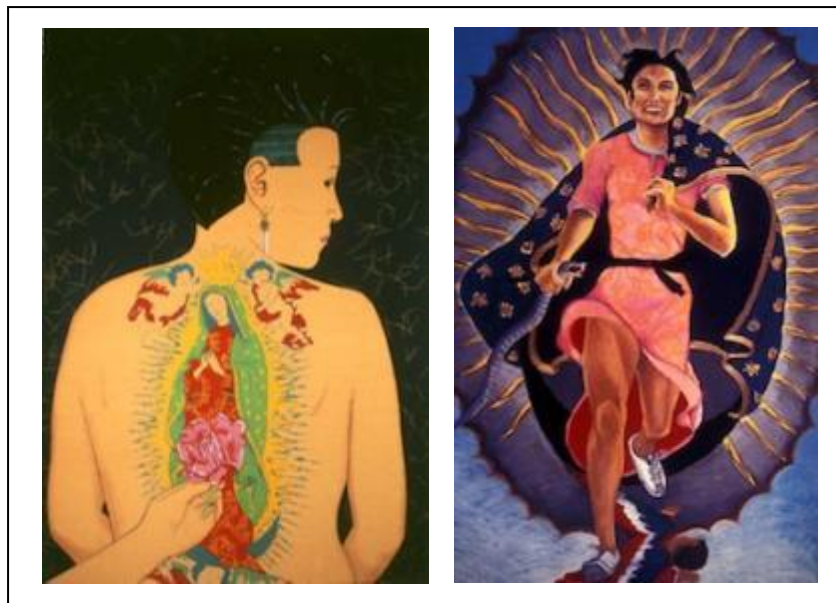


Figure 22. Two images that exemplify Chicana artists 'subversive' use of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The first painting (L) "*La Ofrenda*" (the offering) is by artist Ester Hernandez (1988); the second one (R) "*Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*" is from artist Yolanda Lopez. Photos: courtesy of the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives CEMA at UCSB.

In these examples, the fear of feminization and loss of national virility are tied to a legacy of colonial subordination. Following this framework, it may be that the over-sexualization of women paired with the hyper-masculinity displayed in lowriders can be linked to a perceived need to reclaim and assert a masculinity that has been questioned or compromised by feelings of defeat and failure experienced by Chicanos, going all the way back to the consequences of the US-Mexico War<sup>20</sup> as amplified for their oppressive condition. In this case, this perceived emasculation is also amplified by an extended history of immigration that has forced many Mexican males to move to *El Norte*.<sup>21</sup> This forced migration entails leaving behind their families and the realms of family life. Further, this migration has resulted in the compromise of performing jobs that they perceive as denigrating their masculinity, always in the service of the 'conquerors.' In other words, as a defeated male, Chicano masculinity is put into question by the alliances with the 'enemy.' Definably, this is a area that requires more analysis and research.

Here, claiming ownership over women's bodies and their representation as exclusive objects of pleasure can be interpreted as part of the process of claiming a particular form of modernist masculinity based on patriarchal models of power. In this case, the hyper-heterosexuality often expressed in lowriders' images comes to exist as a tool to gain and assert

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<sup>20</sup> A war that ended with the subsequent loss of the Mexican territories that form what is now the American Southwest (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, and parts of Colorado, Utah, Kansas and Oregon).

<sup>21</sup> The United States

manhood and virility. The car becomes the masculine ideal materialized. However, it can be explained also as the byproduct of the fear of being perceived as a “not man enough” or as a “brown-*joto*<sup>22</sup>.” The solution presented by modernity is one that is a trap, where in order to prove their manhood men are expected to reproduce sexual stereotypes. The issue of masculinity therefore becomes a central component of a rigid nationalist project. This is expressed, for example, in many car images of Aztec warriors defending vulnerable-sexy women. In the case of the 1960s Chicano Movement, this male-centered heterosexual national savior and hero is expressed through the image of Joaquin, in Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ famous poem “*I am Joaquín*” and also as the omnipresent subject behind the “*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*.”

In addition, I suggest that this objectification and dehumanization of women may also stem from low-riders’ misguided desire to control the forces that they believe subjugate them. Their status as marginalized barrio people, with little or no control over urban development policies, economic disparities, or job access, motivates desires for a ‘customized world,’ which is reflected in the customization of their cars. I suggest, however, that as a consequence of the internalization of oppressive practices that have been imposed on them, low-riders erroneously extrapolate these desires to the customization of women. This degenerates to the creation of unreal, unproportioned, and fantastical feminine beings, who are represented as

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<sup>22</sup> *Joto* is a derogatory Mexican term for a homosexual. The term can be in some way translated as faggot.

commodities and as exclusive objects for male pleasure (see Figure 23).

Therefore, many of the images of women on the cars are as highly customized as the cars themselves. The women presented here, as well as the car-models around car shows, are very distant from the realities of actual women's lives or the images low-riders would want to use to depict their wives, mothers, or daughters.



*Figure 23. An image on a lowrider car representing an overly sexualized woman. Here, low-riders as moral rogues turn the private gazing of the erotic into a public performance. This hyper-hetero male sexuality is based on an imaginary desire of an unattainable sexuality.*

In this case, the subjugation of other subjects who have been positioned in an even more disadvantaged position within the patriarchal model allows low-riders to oppress women as a means to 'prove' their superior status. By oppressing others, low-riders replicate the same practices of the *master*, as if they were masters themselves. However, in a process that



fools them, they are trapped into the reproduction of oppression, the reinforcement of male power, and their privilege over anyone outside heterosexual modes. With the 'power' to create and display such images, low-riders engage in a parallel arena of oppressive misogyny, which is no different (in substance) than mainstream subjugation of women.

I suggest, perhaps counter-intuitively, that within this highly oppressive heterosexual model part of the subversive nature of lowriding is also based on an intentionally overt shift between private and public. What is defined as a private activity, watching erotic images, is relocated to the public sphere of the streets. Images that in real life low-riders themselves do not use publicly to define the women in their lives are presented as ordinary occurrences. Here, sexuality emerges as another exercise that is intentional, if dangerously unpredictable. Certainly, the contradictions are abundant, especially with respect to the representation of sexual desires and power. From a border point of view, low-riders force the viewers to de-center their perceptions and read a different 'narrative' from a place sometimes foreign to them, one where low-riders are in control of the message and its reading. As George Lipsitz (1997) notes, lowriders "encourage a bi-focal perspective- they are made to be watched but only after adjustments have been made" (p. 358). They seek the attention but not necessarily the approval of viewers. The use of multiple, bold, supra violent, or over-sexualized images, mix with images of angels, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, and peaceful children. This

combination can impose on the viewer an intentional state of uneasiness (see Figure 24).



*Figure 24. Photo of a lowrider, showing how images, traditionally defined as contradictory, can coexist simultaneously in a car without creating a conflict. In this case, over-sexualized women surround the image of the Virgin Mary, as the Virgin of Guadalupe. This juxtaposition of images shows how low-riders express the extreme contradictions of the border, on one side violence, oppression, and suffering, while simultaneously representing their desires of hope, resiliency, and care for their community.*

The use of apparently ‘contradictory,’ ‘scandalous,’ and/or ‘out-of-context’ images can also be interpreted as a mechanism to pace the speed of ‘reading’ the cars. These ‘out-of-context’ images work in the same manner as commas and exclamation marks in a text. They guide the speed of the

narrative and how the overall image is read. Therefore, overly sexualized images that are highly policed in modernity are thrust into the gazes of people visiting a car show.

When looking at a lowrider, the viewer is tricked into a visual game. What is apparent and what is actually presented are two different things. The final 'image' on the car is highly important (as evidenced by the quality of their paint jobs, the amount of money spent, and the social value given to select painters and upholsterers). Underneath the obvious car customizations, however, exists a set of hidden values associated to their images and icons. In order to see what hidden behind the images, a viewer is required to use, as Emma Pérez (1999) proposes, a *queer gaze* capable of seeing simultaneously the disparities and anomalies in the world at once.

When people look at a rug or some other woven object, they often focus upon the face of the figure constructed. They expect a clean image with some kind of well-defined lines or patterns. We have been conditioned to look for a final image with a tight narrative. However, it is only by turning the rug over that we see all the work, the connections, the additions, the jumps, and the imperfections needed to build the image. The reverse side may have not been defined as 'pretty' but it is a crucial part of the main image. In a similar way, Terry Eagleton (1996, p. 12) in *Against the Grain* uses the metaphor of a tapestry to explain literary criticism. As he suggests, some scholars focus their attention on the obvious image on the front of the tapestry, while other scholars prefer to look behind it, into what is revealed

by *turning the tapestry over*. Looking behind the tapestry allows these scholars to understand how it has been produced. As Eagleton clarifies, looking at both sides permits a wider understanding of the interconnection of the multiple forces involved in the creation of a literary piece. The knowledge that derives from this understanding allows for the development of a different array of questions about the tapestry as a whole, including its social context, the distribution of power, and the enactment and contradictions of hegemony.

Low-riders' bold and unapologetic visual mores manifested in their cars present the viewer with the political, the social and the aesthetic. Here, the visual effect of a lowrider custom car is amplified by the paradoxes of its environment: a perfect car exists within the violence and poverty imposed on a mostly working class community. In their car murals, lowriders embody (in many cases) the contradictions and the 'patterns' of violence experienced in the borderlands. These contradictions are revealed even when the only intervention in the narrative is defined by shifting who is the one in charge. To be able to recognize how power works and see how it ties into their community's history represents a crucial epistemology for border subjects. Creating a timeline through images and car customizations that represent a genealogy of their oppression works also as an inventory of tools that might help construct a different world.

For Ben Chappell (2001), the apparent semiotic excessiveness and "arbitrary juxtaposition of images" (p. 10) in lowriders must be interpreted

not as a history *lost* but more as a viable reinterpretation and re-inscription of their history. In this case, a lowrider car affixes itself to the oppositional realities of the borderlands, just as contemporary mobile *corridos* present an overall image that is a collage of multiple images, designs, and patterns emanating from multiple places, sometimes even with disparate and antagonistic genealogies and identities (Farago and Pierce, 2006, p. 165). It is precisely the presence of this array of images that activates the potential power and advertises the superlative communication qualities of an object, in this case a lowrider. Sometimes the narratives are clear and sometimes the lines of ideas and stories make sense only in the minds of the painter, the club, or the car owner. These cars are not so much a means for transportation (e.g., to move people or objects), but rather as a means to transport the imagination as moving metaphors and objects of art, as statements, and stories materialized in the object.

In many ways, it is as if the lowrider expresses what Claire Farrago (2006) calls “visual bilingualism” (p. 185),<sup>23</sup> — the capacity to speak multiple semiotic languages and codes at the same time. I believe that because of their inherent mobile quality as ‘in-between,’ that lowriders are in many ways

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<sup>23</sup> Claire Farago developed the concept of “visual bilingualism” (159) during her work studying the cultural production of traditional *retablos* in New Mexico, as an idea to help us understand the complexity of cultural productions that are developed in the borderlands or contact zones. Visual bilingualism, as she says, talks about a condition where images express themselves as ‘in-between’ aesthetic realities. As she says, this bilingualism must be perceived as part of a process of cultural survival, sometimes referred as syncretism, a stage of “polysemy and multivalence of [...] symbolism” (Farago & Pierce, 2006, p.185).

forced to utilize a multiplicity of images from multiple sides in order to expand their communication effectiveness and convey their visual punch. In other words, this “visual bilingualism” allows low-riders to articulate their message to a larger community, one diversely composed by a spectrum of members from multiple sides of the cultural border, from different ages and educational levels.



*Figure 25. A lowrider car named 'Kash Flow.' The car works as a canvas portraying the desires for the future, a new world different from the reality of the barrio. Here, the painter utilized the language of capitalism to define this new future. In addition, note the use of language 'Kash' for 'Cash' and the color green for money in order to accentuate their message. It is important to note also the use of popular hip-hop iconography, the reference of women, and the police canine units and black uniforms.*

Low-riders create and rearrange historical facts based on the survival-based perspective of their borderlands experience. In many ways, the cars become autobiographical storytellers from a 'rogue' point of view. In lowriders, the present is explained as a consequence of a past, in a cause and effect mode. Low-riders' misfortunes are the misfortunes of the Chicano community. Low-riders emerge as authors and actors in historical events. It is by the visually arresting spectacle put together by the graphics, images, music, clothes, and the car transformations in general that the low-riders become didactic performers-at-large that display, creating, preserving and transforming heritage.

Low-riders utilize their cars as vehicles for retelling their own story to present and future generations. Car images and customizations work together in the creation of a series of personal, familial, and community narratives that can be used for understanding the relationship between the past and the present, and for formulating hopes for the future (see Figure 25). Therefore, the car comes to stand as a dynamic repository of collective representation of personal relationships to the community. As Brenda Jo Bright observes, in "many [car] murals, the car functions as a stand-in for the hopes and desires of the owner" (Bright and Bakewell, p. 110). It is through the elaborate murals presented in their cars that low-riders retell their stories of survival and resilience to their own communities as a way to empower themselves and battle visually against hegemony. Low-riders transfer their accrued historical knowledge from one generation to another.

For example, on many occasions, the cars become a visual genealogical tree by portraying the images of a family or a canvas to remember deceased love ones (see Figure 26).



*Figure 26. Images of the car named, “recuerdos” (memories), in which the car becomes a mobile album to remember and publically mourning a family member, his father. However, this album is based on the promise of a better life in paradise via the religious reference to Christianity.*

On other occasions, lowriders are also projections of ideal self-portrayals and beliefs of their owners. In many cases, the car is used to memorialize the violence attendant to extreme social and racial disparities. In other cases, lowriders become a mechanism for grappling with the painful effects of subjugation by making fun, satirizing, or building an alternative space — one that is far removed from reality yet eternally shaped by it. This is evident, for example, in the building of richly fantastic velvet spaces inside a car or by depicting images where social class is flagrantly flipped and



challenged. In this case, the car becomes a space that demonstrates an alternative rearrangement of reality, one that is outside the general imagination bounded by a mundane status quo.

By visually engaging in the technologies of mockery and satire, lowriders enact social criticism in a manner that enables their creators to empower themselves and emerge triumphant even under the realities of poverty and the violence of the barrio. Making fun and ridiculing the Other can serve as social mechanisms for decompressing and, as Ybarra-Frausto (1991) notes, to prove that they are "*fregados pero no jodidos*" (down but not out), especially because they know that the last word has not been yet spoken. It is through the process of making fun — especially of those in power and the absurdities generated by the contradictions, aggressions, and abuses of the dominant social world — that low-riders engage in a process that challenges the normalization of the existing structures of domination as a means to speak for them and their culture(s). Since traditional communication channels in society have proven deficient (or non-existent) for oppressed communities, low-riders approach their cars as speakers that broadcast their disapproval of and discontent with the current dominant society. Low-riders produce a 'safe unattached' place to tell others of their experiences. The car becomes an instrument for divulging their subaltern voices and enacting and envisioning social changes on their own terms, to have fun and to mock.

Low-riders, as contemporary *pícaros* or rogues, use the resources

available to them to achieve their visual statement of 'presence.' They do this even by breaking 'the law' of what is 'appropriate' and 'correct.' Lowriders as mobile *pícaros* work as antiheroes and as 'delinquently' savvy, and ingenuous social deviants who speak to the working classes and the unprivileged. In many ways, low-riders challenge the preconceived notions and norms established around cars. As border *pícaros* who live on the edge of social codes, they are in constant pursuit of redemption and honor through the customization of their currently unresponsive world. In many ways, a low/riders' life is a life defined by performance. As 'chameleons' of space and circumstances, these modern rogues are always on the defensive — yet ever in search of ways to express their desires for a more accepting, egalitarian, and hopeful world.

In the end, just as in traditional *corridos*, lowriders emerge as the main characters, as contemporary knights ready to engage in a war for social justice (R. Saldivar, 2006, p. 32) and equality. The low/rider, as a border *pícaro* (rascal) challenges the normative structures of social gazing by transforming cars into a political medium to gaze (or roar) back at others and to over-expose them to being seen. In the context of a community constantly under the pressure of legal constraints, harassment, and surveillance, the lowrider car is, according to Brenda Bright (1995), the medium that "transforms the fact of being under surveillance into the pleasure of being watched. He, the lowrider, transforms himself pictorially from being the despised object of social control into an envied subject acting out his own

desires" (p. 96). Rather than running and hiding, low-riders utilize pronounced camp aesthetics capable become the center of attention. They are masters of seditious cameo (see Figure 27).



*Figure 27. Lowrider car performing as the center of attention.*

By becoming extraordinarily visible and unavoidable, low-riders also make the gazer vulnerable. When everyone is looking, whatever happens becomes part of the public record. By turning into a spectacle, they flaunt social rules and behavioral norms. They are capable of doing so because they have learned the rules of engagement used by the mainstream. Turning and amplifying the center of attention toward themselves works as a means of protection and simultaneously as a means to de-center power from those who are traditionally in control.

In many ways, the performance of car hopping — with the aid of

hydraulics — as well as the exaggerated use of bright colors can be associated to the desire of infusing animal characteristics to the automobile. In this regard, the car can be interpreted as a 'living' entity reflective of the owner's desires for mating to attract the opposite sex. In this case, the car performs as a phallic object exemplifying its arousal by hopping up-and-down and slow cruising.

Finally, it is important to say that during car shows and cruising spectacles the entire community experiences some kind of public catharsis by their performance, where knowledge about the community and its creativity is shared. For the clubs and the artists, for example, car shows are akin to portfolios or business cards. These cars become moving objects of art, and the car shows therefore become the galleries where they are displayed. In addition, car shows as carnivals and festivals are also spaces where the self-esteem and value of borderlands artists are confirmed and reinforced, especially because they have been traditionally ignored and disqualified by traditional authorities and artistic gatekeepers (Cantwell, 1994, p. 169). It is within these communal spaces where they achieve recognition as carriers of collective knowledge and where their knowledge is passed on. Therefore, every lowrider public event serves to revitalize their community as a whole.

Car shows and cruising spectacles produce and maintain community solidarity among their members (Muir, 1997, p. 3). It is inside the show, in a park, on a street corner, or in the city fairgrounds that low-riders are 'free' to perform their rituals and reconstruct their realities and histories. This is

particularly relevant when we consider police and state control of city space. These car shows, as safe urban spaces, become spheres of concentrated auto-definition and reaffirmation, including the politics of cultural pride. These spaces become places where community is called into being through performance (Avruch, 2003, p. 80). In this case, lowrider 'carnivals' are utilized to reinforce knowledge of cohesion and genesis (Muir, 1997, p. 4) not only by 'remembering' a unique customized past, but also by building a communal future by unifying the different fragments of their universe (see Figure 28).

Because of their intrinsic educational value, lowrider gatherings also become a locus for knowledge networking and sharing. They are places to become informed about what is going on at the core of the community as well as about forthcoming events and future gatherings. It is also the place to learn the moral conduct expected as a member of the group and to understand the consequences of misbehaving (Muir, 1997, p. 3). At the shows and social events, new aesthetic trends are incorporated, validated, modified and deconstructed. It is also the place where new artists and cars club members are 'officially' introduced to the community. Clubs use car shows as their pulpit to announce their new members and new cars as well as political events or threats.



*Figure 28. Car shows, car club picnics, informal gatherings, and car tours work collectively to build a sense of community, to create places for increased cohesion, to educate their members, and to be safe.*

Though lowrider communities also have magazines, websites, and e-groups, it is at the car show that any relevant event is announced and communicated to the entire community. Lowrider gatherings are crucial to their survival since they are the main spaces for attracting new members into the clubs and to teach youngsters the traditions of lowriding and cruising. By the spectacle put together between the graphics, images, music, social roles, and car transformations in general, the show becomes a didactical

performance-at-large and places to display heritage — a vehicle for retelling their own story to their future generations.

The car show's importance transcends the show itself and transcends the immediate gathering as a cultural agent that perpetuates and builds identity. Car shows are places to exhibit a "community's social memory" (R. Saldívar, 2006, p. 19). These car shows approximate border folk festivals, which simultaneously work as a means to resist hegemonic discourses at the same time that they work as spaces to integrate their members into a counter-hegemonic alliance (Kapferer, 1983, p. 65). It is in the car show and cruising events that the low-riders achieve full 'control' and 'awareness' of their space and place as Chicanos, where they gather knowledge about what it means to be a low-rider in a racialized state.

### ***A Car Tune-up: Building New Spaces.***

Earlier I discussed how aesthetic manipulation through camp produces *safe zones* or areas where subjugated subjects can 'relax' from their constant burden of being under surveillance as well find a place to build community. Lowriders also inscribe spaces that reproduce their vision of an egalitarian world through the practices of a "transnational imaginary" (Saldívar, 2006, p. 61). Car customization turns the fantastic into the quotidian, and the quotidian into the fantastic, as they also play with the absurd and the real. In one way, low-riders turn an ordinary object, as a car, into a fantastic object, as a lowrider. Simultaneously, the fantastic, such as

those images of heroes, gods, and *Aztlán* that are part of the imaginary, are turned into quotidian symbols, which are real and accessible to all. Lowriders work as spaces to imagine a different world and also serve as mechanisms to bridge the imaginary into the material world. In the context of *la frontera*, I call this process the *recreation of Aztlán*, by which I mean an activity where the ‘mythical’ past is trans-located into the present as a new *Aztlán* that is mobile and extemporal, and that disrupts and “transcend[s] territorial identities” (Bright and Bakewell, 1995, p. 105). Certainly, as Bright (1995) explains, “lowrider car[s have] created an alternate cultural space for performance, participation, and interpretation. The presence of such a cultural alternative allows for the reworking of the limitations of mobility placed on racialized cultures” (p. 91).

For a community traditionally disenfranchised from decisions about their lands, homes, and barrio urban development, a lowrider provides a mobile space of ownership where aspirations can be materialized, imagined, and fantasized. In this case, lowriders represent mobile spaces of transgression against urban ghettoization, segregation, and gentrification. A car moves beyond the limitations imposed by the racialization of spaces in the city. The statements imprinted within the car have the potential to traverse the city, turning the whole region into an enabling space where their statements can be communicated, especially in those places where they are not expected to be.



In an environment where the realities of segregation and social disparity can be harsh and extreme, the ‘myth’ of *Aztlán* provides an imaginary place where low-riders are in control, where ‘finally’ there is a balance between them, and their surroundings. Here, what seems unobtainable becomes reality. As Bright (1995) explains, “the important effect of these drawings, and of low rider cars as well, is that they create a new kind of “home” for Chicanos in a landscape of symbols containing histories of the present” (p. 109). I argue that low-riders in their extreme velvet upholsteries and car colors reproduce within their cars an imaginary past and an idealization of *Aztlán* with the aim of surviving, but also they propose an appealing alternative to their hostile everyday environment. Lowriders become also sites for recreation, fun, and cultural pride. Here, an imaginary non-chronological past collides simultaneously with a desirable future that is highly rearranged and customized, bringing both of them into the present, as part of Chicana/os’ *remythification* of their current reality. In many ways, creating these fantastic mobile spaces allows a taste of a hopeful future, without rejecting their reality.

With all their customization, lowriders reflect Foucault’s concept of heterotopias (1986, p. 25). The effort put into creating a “perfect” space where all the details have been considered — almost to a fetish status — works to ensure that this ‘new world’ compensates for and erases the cruel reality where low-riders are forced to live. Velvet interiors, chandeliers as internal lights, paint decorated engines, engraved windows, and mirrors

under the cars can all be explained as part of the recreation of this fantastic world where the worries of reality can be put aside, thus freezing social realities momentarily (see Figure 29). This also represents another instance of how border subjects are capable of expressing the notion that they are not defeated, 'down but not out.' Low-riders utilize their cars and the practices around them as a means to envision a new fantastic reality, right here and right now.



*Figure 29. An example of meticulous customization of a car. The on the ground allow the viewer to admire the customization under the car as well. Everything is on display!*

In many ways, these fantastic *rasquache* productions provide a reason to wake up every day and confront a hostile world. As described by Richard

Rodríguez (1984), a long-term low-rider, “cruising was a tradition... it was a Chicano alternative to Disneyland. [That] brought *Raza* together from all parts of Southern California [as an]... unequalled entertainment for a minimal price” (p. 23). Lowriders with their over-customized spaces re-define the politics of ownership and recreation. Graphics and mechanical transformation become political entities of identity where the real and the fantastic mingle simultaneously. This appreciation of cruising is essential to understanding the value these ‘fantasy cars’ have as a subversive form of enjoyment for a subjugated community (see Figure 30).



*Figure 30. A lowrider with over-customized upholstery, as an example of the recreation of a fantastic world. This kind of upholstery was particularly popular during the late 1980s and early 1990s.*

Moreover, the creation of these fantastic new spaces or mobile *Aztlán(s)*, goes beyond mere recreation. These cultural productions or artifacts also create different notions of core concepts such as nation and citizenship. It is from this imaginary and highly customized space that low-riders reclaim their status as full citizens and members of society, restoring their denied rights and benefits. The Chicano nationalist project is materialized in the low-riders.

Finally, it is from the context of this new space that low-riders also implement another subversive move, one that utilizes central components of capitalism to redefine the rules of engagement. They have transformed it, however, in a way that becomes their own ‘intellectual’ property, with a collective ownership. Low-riders fundamentally challenge core notions of what a car is — while simultaneously shifting the parameters used to ‘evaluate’ monetary value. Because of the high-personalization of lowriders, it is almost impossible to define fixed market rules for their prices. In this case, a market object becomes almost un-marketable. In part, this un-marketable is defined by a mismatch between individual taste and mass demand. This is further worsened by the ambiguous status of lowriders as ‘in-between’ objects. On one hand, lowriders are far removed from notions of ‘authenticity’ required to define them as ‘recreations.’ On the other hand, low-rider notions of what is ‘original’ are not based on the manufacturer’s catalogue, but on a personalized vision. The cars have become extensions of the owner (Bright and Bakewell, p. 106) and, by default highly un-

transferable. In addition, lowriders do not follow traditional standards of safety to the point that many cars can well be defined as unsafe if driven. From a capitalist point of view, lowriders' possibilities for resale are very limited and restricted.

A car, once originally discarded as just junk, is elaborately transformed and raised from the dead. Trash is recycled and turned into an object to be observed. If examined from a Eurocentric epistemology this triumphant object of Chicana/o ingenuity represents a contradiction, a car that is not a car; and, in some ways, it a car that greatly exceeds all traditional notions of a car. It is only through the eyes of 'border thinking' that lowriders reveal themselves as epistemic maneuvers of the border.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**INTERPRETATIONS OF COLOR WITHIN LOWRIDERS —**  
**“CRUISING THE BARRIO”**

This chapter is based upon data collected during my several years conducting research on lowriders in the Valley of the Sun, Arizona. The collaborators include: lowrider car owners, car painters, lowrider businesses, and car club members. In particular, this chapter focuses on interviews and observations around the topic of the use, selection, and interpretation of color by low-riders and their cars.

As explained before, during the description of the methodology for this research, 24 collective and individual interviews took place, with 19 different low-riders (see Appendix C, Interviewees Demographic table). In the case of five individuals, I interviewed them on more than one occasion, with the objective of gathering more in-depth information. The material was transcribed and organized by way of recurring topics. On several occasions the information was repeated by different interviewees; in those cases, I decided two things: 1) Utilize the most complex interventions that allows for the unpacking of more material; and 2) In those cases where the level of complexity is very similar, I decided to keep the narrative of the current speaker rather than add a new one in the text. This action allowed for the continuity of his ideas. In those cases where two or more low-riders agreed on the same topic, such agreement will be duly noted. In accordance with the

ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (see Appendix C), the individuals interviewed were given the option to choose an anonymous name; however, several low-riders preferred to use their real names or an artistic pseudonym.

The lowriders, as the real experts, were allowed to tell their stories and share their points of view in their own words. With deliberate intent, I tried to limit my own interventions to a minimum. I applied my efforts as a researcher to the act of witnessing only. Further, I tried to create the type of conditions necessary to encourage those associated with lowriding to feel safe enough to share their experiences. I wished to have the interview experiences result in a fair representation of their realities as much as possible.

This chapter will focus exclusively on what low-rider aficionados, painters, and members of the Low n' Slow community express around the role of color as it relates to the perpetuation of their identity and the overall relationship they have with the Chicana/o community. As we will see, the interviewees perceive lowriders as causative forces in the unique practices of the border, as well as expressions of vernacular epistemologies. The keen awareness of their characterization as members of a marginalized community, their subversive and simultaneously subtle approaches to their customization, and their mastering of the visual discourses all contribute toward understanding the intrinsic value of their cultural productions, as well the importance for design research for these communities.

This chapter delves into a variety of areas and explores such topics as: how this community understands what is a lowrider; the process of decision-making followed by painters about their designs; and in the selection of colors to be used on the cars. The chapter will also explore the relevance of color as an essential component of lowrider car customizations, lowriders' opinions about the existence of a unique Chicana/o color palette, and the influence that car clubs have in the selection of color. In addition, this chapter also examines how the low-riders interviewed perceive the issues of gender and race as connected to color. Finally, it will explore how low-riders perceive their lowrider practices as elements meant to help their community to heal and to move out of their marginalized status. As it will be shown, there are multiple and varied elements but ultimately this complexity will define and advance understanding of their practices and the role vernacular design and production play in the lives of this community.

### **LOWRIDER CAR CLUBS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON COLOR AND CAR CUSTOMIZATIONS.**

From its beginning as a social structure that has sustained the growth and the development of lowriding, car clubs have been an integral part of the Low n' Slow movement, Their influence goes beyond the mere organization of social and charity events. After the love for customizing lowriders and cruising, car clubs represent the central most important institution in unifying lowriders aficionados. Their influence in creating new aesthetic



trends and new venues of expression is clear. As a formal network that assists and guides new lowriders in the practices of the Low n' Slow, car clubs advise and promote particular painters, styles, and events. Some car clubs are organized around a particular car model, (e.g., Impalas), ideological team (e.g., Born again Christians), gender (e.g., Ladies' Touch – a female car club), geographic location (e.g., Califas, aka Southern California), or aesthetic style (e.g., Old School), just to mention a few of the multiple possibilities available. A car clubs function as a support system, and helps its members to navigate the multiple elements involved on lowriding. However, not every lowrider belongs to a car club; some of them may choose to be independent for many reasons, including the freedom from constraints created by car club standards and rules. Jessie Duarte, a lifetime and founding member of Life Style, a car club located in Mesa, Arizona explains,

The car club helps the individual to identify the best qualities for that vehicle. It is a great group of people... The car club members are more like a support family for the person... They help to identify a color... they help you locate the painters, [the] body [shop] people. It is like a network of people that work together. (personal communication, March 19, 2011)

It is important to understand that different low-riders will relate differently to their car clubs. For some of them, the club is like an extended family; for others, car clubs represent a group of acquaintances that share an interest in lowriders customizations as a hobby. Car clubs have rules and regulations

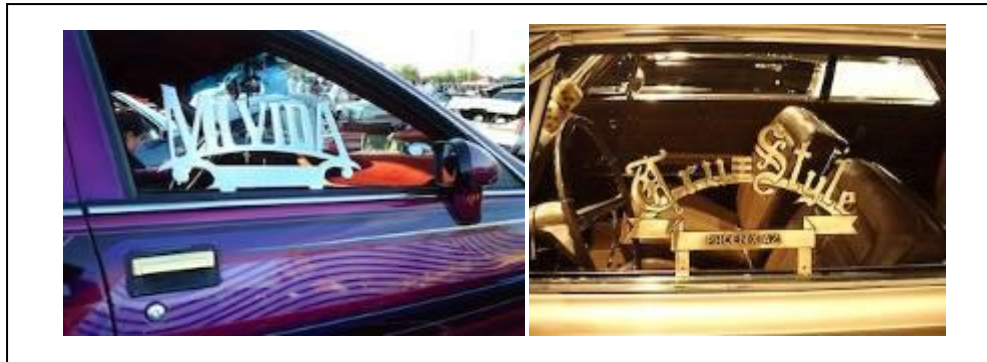
that define how to join a club, as well as the requirements needed in order to achieve a car club *placa*. A *placa* is a metal signature of the club that is located in any of the car windows, (although normally it is displayed in the back window) in such a way that can be easily recognizable by others when cruising or displaying the car. The *placa* is a unique piece for each car club, given to a low-rider only after the fulfillment of all of the club's aesthetic and social requirements. A *placa* is given to a lowrider car once a car club has evaluated the car, and has sufficiently proven to represent that car club's identity. If an owner subsequently changes something about the car aesthetically, he cannot display the *placa* until the car club has re-examined and re-approved the car. A committee designated by the car club, normally formed by senior members of the club, will undertake the process of evaluation. They are responsible for meeting with the car owner and reviewing the car. A *placa* essentially constitutes a public membership card that is attached to a car (see Figure 31). Ruben Ochoa is very protective about his car club *placas*, and states as much when he says,

*A placa is sacred... and it is not given to anybody. It is given to somebody that deserves it. We will give a placa to a car, and an owner that deserves that. Because the placa is a symbol, it represents you. It is like a familia... whatever they do, will reflect you and the club. Because they are your family... they have a great connection with you!*  
(personal communication, March 30, 2011)

The car club's own relationship to car customizations is related to how they understand the concept of authenticity. As Ruben Ochoa explained, "there are clubs that only stick with original car styles... [or] their interpretation of [what is] original" (personal communication, March 30, 2011). This is important because the level of 'appropriate' car customizations is driven by a club's conceptual understanding of what is an original car, and how much transformation can be performed before the identity of the car and the club are compromised. As we have seen before, this concept of authenticity has been used to define car colors, as well as the selection of accessories and upholstery. Those selections are not based on accurate reproduction of the past, but rather about the reproduction of an imagined original.

In terms of color, car clubs have a closely intimate relationship with them as each club may have what they call 'flank colors.' These colors are different than the colors with which they paint their cars. These colors represent the car club, and vary from one club to another. Ochoa illustrates how, "for example, here in Mesa, Society car club colors are maroon and white... Majestics use blue and gold. Society [car club] has maroon and white. Life-Style and Imperials [Car Clubs] are black and gold." From Ochoa's point of view, the recurrent use of two colors in contrast is because they represent "darkness and brightness [and both] together transcend" (personal communication, March 30, 2011). If color is so important to car clubs, how do

car clubs affect car owners and painters regarding color? This is the topic of the section that follows.



*Figure 31. Images of car club placas from the Phoenix metropolitan area.*

The influence of car clubs in the customization of lowriders, including color, transcends the mere evaluation of the cars and the adjudication of *placas*. The club's influence affects the design process of painters and owners, as they are heavily involved in decision-making in many levels. Johnny Lozoya argues, “at least 50% of what happen[s] in car clubs is about sharing ideas [for the cars]. Car clubs suggest painters to go [to]. There is always influencing [each other]” (personal communication, March 23, 2011).

#### **A. Car Clubs' Explicit Aesthetic Influences.**

Car clubs affect the aesthetics of a car in many ways: (a) explicitly, by imposing rules and standards that regulate the level of customization, car models, and style, or/and (b) implicitly by “build[ing] a relationship with artists” (Luis Miranda, personal communication, March 08, 2011),

recommending or rejecting the work or particular painter, auto shop, or mechanic. These two levels of interaction affect a car's final result in a way that each car may be different, but members of the same car club may share similar overarching aesthetic trends or similarities (Chavo, personal communication, April 08, 2011). Danny Galvez, better known artistically as Danny D and one of the current top car painters on the West Coast of the United States, explains this slight difference when he says that it all "depends of the car clubs... But it stays yours... It is your car. It is you, but it is their style in your own way" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). In other words, the car can still be perceived as an individual agent. However, when the car owner embraces the club standards, he is also customizing the car club style to fit his reality. Ruben Ochoa observes,

Every car club has its own style and standards. You can tell, just by the way cars are built, which cars belong to [which] car club. You know, there are certain car clubs that are very traditional, and you have a lot of clubs that are wide open... Some car clubs say 'we want our cars only in these color or shades of paints, and these are the only ones we accept.' There are some car clubs that say 'we don't want white cars,' any color but white or any color but white and black... They will not admit a white or black car in their club. Some other car clubs may say 'you need to have a candy job in order to be part of the car club.' (personal communication, March 30, 2011)

It is precisely because car clubs regulate their members' customization that makes it easy for low-riders to identify car clubs by noting the transformations and the style in cars (see Figure 32). As Ochoa continues to state, "I can tell you what a Life-Style [car club]'s car looks like. Because [we have] a series of six or eight color[s] that are very unique to other car clubs. This is their signature... [In addition to] their wild paint jobs." In the same line of thought, Efrain Gonzales, a car painter from Chandler, Arizona known as "Bugs" says, "I can tell when a car is from Majestic, or Life Style, or Old School... We all have our own identity" (personal communication, March 11, 2011). Finally, Johnny Lozoya explains, "Yes, you can identify a car club by their cars. There are several groups that have what they call 'dedication to excellence,' in other words, you can tell just by looking at the vehicle" (personal communication, March 23, 2011). Now, this is not always a straightforward process, and it requires a deep understanding of the aesthetic differences among car clubs, something that is not very clear, even for all their members (Chavo, Garcia, and Duarte). For example, the concept of "dedication to excellence," as Lozoya explains, is something that is not applied all car clubs equally. Each club defines its own rules of 'excellence' and therefore those rules vary according to the unique definitions of authentic or ideal adopted by the clubs.

In this regard, Jessie Duarte takes a more general position, as he explains, "the graphics and the colors [in the cars]... identify the lowrider culture not necessarily the car clubs" (personal communication, March 19,

2011). According to his point of view, it is the way that particular design components have been put together in creating style variations that will allow low-riders to be identified with particular clubs. Luis Miranda ratifies his argument, when he clarifies that “more than the colors, the style of the car is what defines a club” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). Therefore, what differentiates clubs aesthetically are not necessarily any particular icons, symbols or even colors but rather the composition and the narrative used in conjunction with other components such as car type, model, and the car club own relationship to particular customizations.



*Figure 32. An example of how a car club explicitly influences and defines the aesthetics of its members' lowriders by defining, for example, a particular car model.*

The presence of identifiable variations of style is not consistent among car clubs. For Luis Miranda (personal communication, March 08, 2011), “lesser car clubs are more difficult to identify because they are more general.” For him, the term “lesser” applies to those car clubs that are less rigorous in their aesthetic requirements, mainly because they are too new, or do not have the capital to embrace and enforce those requirements. This differentiation between each club’s aesthetic approach is better explained when he continues saying that, “there are certain car clubs that are going to require a certain color, or certain style of colors in their vehicles... Those are the top clubs... Those that are not top clubs go for more standard colors... because those are the least expensive.” In this case, car club style differentiation comes as a result of many factors, including monetary concerns and car club longevity.

Car clubs that have been in existence for a long time have the resources to refine and perfect their identities, in part because they want to differentiate themselves from other clubs. The older and more mature a car club becomes, the more stable it becomes. Their members also achieve seniority in the community, which further translates into social capital. Well-known car clubs are also invested with mutual pride because their members collect prizes and awards. Older and mature car clubs have a steadier network — one that facilitates the performance of lowriding for their members, but it also requires a more detailed awareness of the aesthetic differences. Therefore, older car clubs may ask for particular and



extended customizations from their members, which translates into a bigger investment.

### **B. Car clubs Implicit Aesthetic Influences.**

At the implicit level, lowrider car clubs influence aesthetic outcomes by recommending car painters, mechanics, auto shops, and upholsters. This may happen because a member of a club is a painter himself. In those cases, the members may go to this painter as an act of loyalty to the club, and also because of that painter's familiarity with the car club standards and rules (see Figure 33). In addition, painters become accustomed to club "rule books" (J. Duarte, personal communication, March 19, 2011), because over time they paint the cars of its members. It is a consequence of the car club's regulations that car owners "cannot take [their] car to any painter or artist," since as Danny D. (personal communication, March 04, 2011) argues, "they need to follow the standards" If a painter fails to follow a car club's requirements, then that member may be penalized or the membership may be revoked. As Danny D. adds, the responsibilities of the painter extends beyond just selecting graphics and colors, "the artist advises about the changes [needed] in order to remain [or] enter a car club... and how to follow car club's requirements" (personal communication, March 04, 2011).

Some low-riders talked about scenarios where inexperience or poor craftsmanship have made painters inappropriate for clubs. In other cases, the main job of a car club is to prevent someone from spending more than what

is generally expected for a car's paint job (Garcia, personal communication, March 21, 2011). From a different perspective, some painters find rules of car clubs too restrictive for their creative work. Preferring not to engage with that level of constraint, these painters work only with independent lowriders. In those cases, they argue that their own creative principles "are very high, beyond the car clubs standards" (Miranda, personal communication, March 08, 2011), and in the case of working with car club members, the painter's artistic work would be compromised and wasted.



*Figure 33. Car clubs influence aesthetics by creating rules and standards in such a way that, in the end, cars from the same club are different but also similar.*

## **COLOR AND AESTHETIC VALUES AS DEFINERS OF A LOWRIDER CAR**

Early at the beginning of this dissertation, (p. 2) I explained what are the differences and parameters used to define a lowrider. However, in this section, I want to explore how car customizations, as part of the Low n' Slow style, are used to differentiate and create an aesthetic identity around the car. This is especially important for understanding how car owners connect to their cars through the process of customization.

As a longtime low-rider now living in Tucson, AZ, Ruben Reyes explains how defining what constitutes a lowrider is not always an easy task, "I remember [as a teenager] trying to explain it to my Mexican father. It was not easy. Still today, it is not easy, because it is not just about the car" (personal communication, March 31, 2011). Reyes's statement calls for closer examination (see Figure 34). Some illumination on this subject can be provided by other low-riders. For example, Sage, a local car club painter says, "the car doesn't make you... I am not defined by the car" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). This observation is crucial and a clear departure from previous approaches that have largely explained lowriding primarily through the notion of identity. This does not mean that this newer view rejects the car; it allows for a redefinition and deeper understanding of what is lowriding. This approach foregrounds other aspects of lowriding such as: a network of collaboration, as an extended family, as a playground for fun, and for social change.



*Figure 34. Four examples of very different local lowriders, demonstrating the diversity and breadth of what constitutes a lowrider.*

Jesse Duarte, a long time low-rider, explains, “the question is not just about what is a lowrider [car] but also what it means to be a lowrider [aficionado], and being part of the lowrider culture... Since, it means different things for different people” (personal communication, March 19, 2011). Here, Duarte allows for not only the differentiation between the practices of car customization and the cultural socialization of low-riders, the Low n’ Slow spirit, but also help us to understand that each of those two spaces are also in states of constant redefinition. In this regard, referring to the customization of cars, Danny D explains, “there is so much mixture... there is not just one

thing, there is not one fixed model about lowriders” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Duarte argues, “the culture [of lowriding] is something that is in you, that you develop, that you have in [yourself]” (personal communication, March 19, 2011).

Therefore, the community of lowriding exists around a series of practices of car customization, and is always transforming, changing, and adapting. What we understand as a lowrider car today is very different from what it meant forty years ago. For example, hydraulics did not become an identifying feature of lowriders until the 1960s. There are even clear differences of opinion between the level of customization and the type of upholstery appropriate for specific lowriders. The social as well as the technical constitute two crucial aspects of lowriders because they strongly influence one another. Both are intrinsically connected.

In regards to the process used to construct a lowrider, Luis Miranda argues that the steps can vary based on the original intention of the final product (personal communication, July 16, 2011). For Miranda, the car can be approached as “a craft-project or as an evolving-project” (personal communication, July 16, 2011). These two types of approaches, in addition to the availability of money, define two different paths of action. In the case of the car as a craft-project, Miranda perceives the lowrider as something external to the owner’s personal life, with a specific scope of creating a show-car-piece. The case of the car as an evolving-project is the opposite; in this situation, the lowrider comes to exist little by little, as if the car owner

progressively develops a different awareness and emotional ties with the car. As Miranda explained in both cases, however, the process of building a lowrider requires a constant re-checking and re-evaluating of the car resources and plan of action. This happens because new challenges emerge along the way. However, in the case of the lowrider as a craft-project, the existence of a design blueprint before starting its construction is more of an imperative. For Miranda, the lowrider as an evolving-project is the most common path used in the lowrider community, as most low-riders take years to develop their cars (personal communication, July 16, 2011). As he explains, the car customization never stops because new additions and changes happen all the time (see Figure 35).

It is important to clarify that low-riders may not always define the added value of their cars exclusively in terms of their level of customization. Other influential elements such as nostalgia, family history, graphic narrativity, and cultural pride are also components of great importance. There is an underlying understanding among lowrider aficionados that a lowrider car is fundamentally more than just a customized automobile. Of course, this is in many ways a contradiction to the current 'official model of evaluating' cars, which is almost completely based upon the level of car transformation, as seen as well in car show competitions.

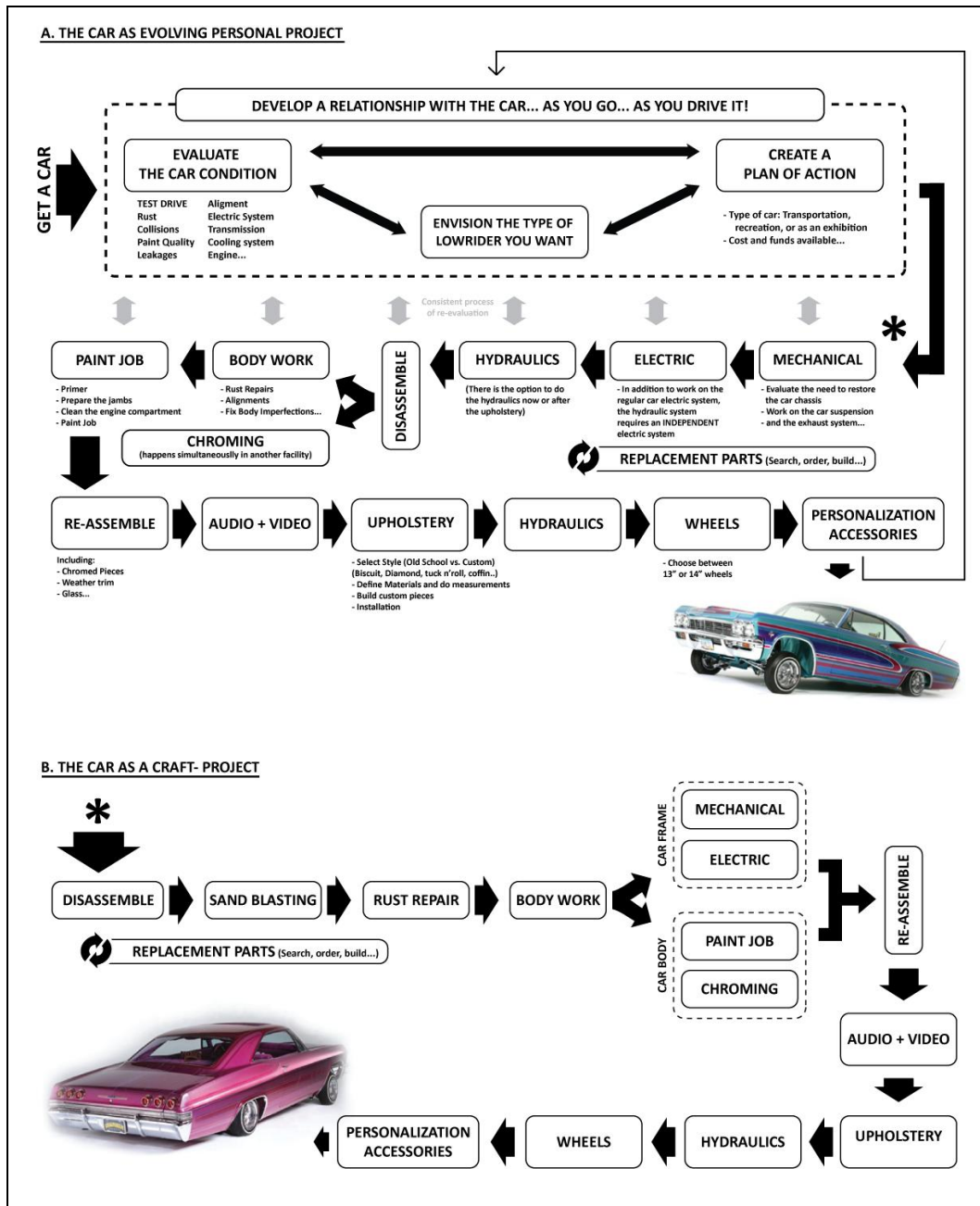


Figure 35. Steps to Build a Lowrider Car. Two different approaches define the paths followed in the build of a lowrider, as an evolving-personal-project (A) or as a craft-project (B). In both cases, there is an evaluation-envisioning step. In the first one, the evolving-project, this evaluation process happens constantly while in the second case, the craft-project, it tends to be more limited to the early parts of the process.

As will be explored in the next interview sessions, the approach to car customization is highly regulated by car club affiliation, by the assignation of placas, as well as by car show's prices and by the judging process. *Lowrider Magazine* itself works as a regulator and 'definer' of socially approved customizations. However, Richard Ochoa, a low-rider veteran and an international lowrider judge for *Lowrider Magazine* explains,

A lowrider is not only about the level of customization. Because, for example, the standards are different [between places], you just try to do your best. In L.A., you see some standards and [if] you go to Española [New Mexico]... the standards are not as high. The guy [in Espanola] may not have paid \$10K for a paint [job] like they could do in L.A. But, you know, if you look closely, in L.A. a guy that is getting paid \$100K, can afford to pay \$10K. While in Espanola, another person can only pays half of that for a paint job... but that can be 10% of his salary. Still the same, the level is there. It is not what is in the pocket book or wallet, but what is in the heart! It is what you put into it, and, that is what comes out of it. You made the best of what you have, and we, Mexicanos and Latinos are very good at making the best of it. (personal communication, March 30, 2011)

In this almost romantic approach, Ochoa tries to address a recurrent discomfort or tension that has emerged among low-riders in the last decades, one that is about the role of customization in lowriding. The cost of customizations, especially under the current economic conditions of the



nation, and Chicanos in particular, has been criticized for the high amounts of money required for viable competition in the car shows. The expenditure of large amounts of money on an object with little direct economic impact for vertical class mobility has been interpreted as a permissively negative aspect — one that perpetuates class subjugation and seen in many cases as a practice that may have fractured and segregated several lowriders who do not have the resources to compete. This approach has created two types of low-riders, those with money, and those without the money or the will to spend it on their cars. For Sage, an emerging car painter, the issue of cost is crucial because it influences the quality of lowriding, in his words:

Sometimes, all it takes is money, and you can buy your way in... It is not like [before] when you were supposed to build everything [in the car]. Now, if you have money, you can buy it. It is a lot easier now.

Money made people lazy. Now you can have a car without a [car club] team. They now rely too much in the artist. You [the car owner] used to have more control. (personal communication, March 04, 2011)

Sage's criticism is particularly important on a number of levels. For example, it draws attention to the nostalgic value of craft making by car owners. In addition, it is important because it questions the role of the painter and the methodology used by low-riders in their customizations. As we will explore in the next section, money and car clubs work together as powerful forces in the determination of which painter will paint the car, and how much can be accomplished with it (see Figure 36).

That said, the issue is not only about the implications of delegating car customization decision-making from the car owner and car clubs to the painter, but it also concerns the level of customization. In this case, the questions are what defines a car, what elements are essential for lowriders, and to what extent some of those customizations define the core of what a lowrider is. For example, Ruben Reyes argues “Nowadays, [lowriding is] hydraulics in steroids... is it really a lowrider, if you cannot really drive it out in the street? There is no way you can take some of these cars out, for cruising on a Saturday afternoon with your family... why should I want a car that I cannot drive?” (personal communication, March 31, 2011). For Reyes, a car is meant to be driven; hence, a lowrider must have the capability of being driven. In Reyes’s point of view, customization that unbalances the core values of a car is unnecessary and serves as a distraction from the car’s central functionality.



*Figure 36. An example of high-cost customized lowrider car.*

These kinds of criteria — money, customizations, car model, etc., represent some of the multiple tensions created around the definition of a lowrider, in part because as a cultural practice there is no one fixed definition. In my opinion, the car remains at the center and regulates the social practices of engagement among its members. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task to define a lowrider principally because it is not just about the car as a transportation device or its level of customized work or the amount of money expended. So what is it?

For Jesse Duarte “a lowrider car is developed by an individual that has put a lot of creativity into it ... art... which is an extension of their personality. We are basically re-developing what General Motors produced 30-40 years ago” (personal communication, March 19, 2011). For Duarte, lowriding is about self-expression and autonomy. However, this re-developing of what is presented by the car industry does not come from the mere acceptance of mainstream aesthetic and racial values, in part because lowrider economic reality is substantially different. For Richard Ochoa, “as a lowrider, you are telling people ‘I would not blend in. I cannot be part of the regular landscape.’ We wouldn’t [blend with mainstream], especially if you have a car built in the lowrider tradition” (personal communication, March 30, 2011). Clearly, lowriders understand that their customization works as a means for self-differentiation, pride, and as a way to claim their own destiny. In this case, the car reinforces their understanding as non-Anglos, as a product steeped in a long tradition.

However, we should not get trapped by the notion that lowriders come to exist only in terms of rejection or anti-forced enculturation desires; by doing so, we miss a significant component of what lowriders are all about. In addition, such thinking will constrain the definition of lowriders and limit their cultural relevance. Sometimes, extreme examples of car customization are a direct consequence of living conditions and do not necessarily result from elaborated aesthetic discernment. Ruben Reyes explains,

Sometimes we end up with cars that were experiments gone-wrong. Sometimes you do not have the time or the money to send your car to a paint shop. You did your car in the [high] school auto shop. You do what you can do, with what you have. For example, I used to have a brown 1979 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme automobile, why? Because, this is what my dad bought. I did not have the money to pay for anything else... overtime it became a *capirotada* (mix-up) with different things that did not always match... but it was mine. It was my lowrider. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

As explained by Reyes here, marginalization and the limited access to resources can work as powerful tools for creativity. In the case of Reyes, the eclectic aesthetic of his car was a consequence of his own limitations and resources. *Capirotadas* are a result of multiple elements, materials, and styles that have been glued together representing in the best sense what is a typical style of the Chicana/o experience, *Rasquachismo*.

In a similar vein, “Bugs” argues that the over-customization of lowriders is a direct consequence of the economic reality that lowriders experienced yesterday and they continue to experience today. As he says, a poor Chicana/o family “cannot go out and buy a Cadillac car. So, guess what? I am going to fix up what I have... I am going to make it look as good as a Cadillac” (personal communication, March 11, 2011). Here, it is obvious that as a marginalized community Latina/os and Chicana/os are forced to create artistic realities that fit their economic conditions, which permit them to imagine a future that is grounded in their reality. In other words, it is as if one were to build Las Vegas using the debris of South Phoenix, but with extraordinary skill and exacting attention to the details that characterize those who need to maximize visual effect with the resources they have.

Even when I have referred to lowriders as practices utilized to envision alternative realities — what I have termed the reconstruction of a new *Aztlán* — I do not want this to be misinterpreted as if lowriding practices are efforts to deny and avoid reality. On the contrary, these are real solutions to real problems. They are designing with what they have. The fantasies created by their flamboyant mobile spaces are innately rooted in their creators’ everyday struggles. It is the real of the hyper-real. As Ruben Reyes explains:

I don’t think it is fantasy, for the contrary [lowriding] it is very real... It is an artistic expression... A lowrider owner puts his heart and soul into the car. They want to say something, whether is the Virgin of

Guadalupe, the Mexican-American logos, the farmer working community, [and/or] political statements... Whatever it is, whatever you want to call it, it is up to the imagination of that individual to express what they are living. Low riding is very... very real. It is a statement of who they want to be. This is what I am, and I will put it in my car, so everywhere I go, that car will be with me. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

For Reyes, it is obvious that low-riders are deeply connected to their struggles and challenges as a marginalized community. Marginalization is not only a result economic condition but also by the process of visual and aesthetic taste subjugation. As a case in point, the presence of 'Mexican' symbols within an object, culturally linked to the American post War II experience as in the case of the Chevy Impalas, represents a conscious tool used to reinforce the importance of low-rider's visual language. It is also a way to perpetuate and pass their vernacular visual knowledge to their community. The iconography in the cars allow the owners to tell their own personal experience to their community (see Figure 37).

However, low-riders do not work only with one aesthetic language; instead, they are capable of mastering multiple visual codes simultaneously. On one hand, there is the code associated with mainstream value of the car in the United States, especially its ability to serve as a tool for transportation and speed. This is why extreme customization may be perceived as a danger to the Low n' Slow movement by several lowrider aficionados because it

questions the core value of what is a car. On the other hand, lowrider cars serve as a canvas by which to preserve Mexican/Latino heritage. In other words, the lowrider car becomes a vehicle to confront the visual hegemony of the West by presenting it as a re-arrangement of multiple images in a way that is loud and pronouncedly evident so as to silence the oppressor.



*Figure 37. Image of a lowrider car named “En mi Vida” (In my Live). The owner portrayed several important events that have defined his life.*

Following Reyes arguments, we can say that lowriders perceive car customization as part of their process of self-redefinition as full and enabled members of society, but in their own terms. This point is crucially important because it argues against the notion that low-riders create customization in a vacuum, as autonomous cultural practice without interference from the

predominating American reality. The blend of both realities is evident in the way that low-riders are capable of managing traditional values around the car and add new ones. As Ruben Reyes explains,

This is our culture. This is what we do. The car is America's favorite toy... we look at it in the same way. This [lowriding] is very American. I do not want my car to be a hot-rod. Instead of going fast, I am going to do the opposite... I am going slowly. Instead of riding high with the 4x4 wheels, I am going low... But, the core still the same. Cruising Sunday afternoon with your family... your love for the car is [as] American as the apple pie, but with your own brand, with your own culture. The core still is the same, the image changes. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

For Ruben Reyes, there is an evident need for lowriders to be understood in the context of the American fascination with cars, and their customization as part of the unique Chicana/o relationship with the American dream. Cruising on Sunday with one's family, as everybody else does, can be interpreted also as an implied recognition of full citizen rights and the 'pursuit of happiness.' Furthermore, the American dream is re-interpreted and re-evaluated, in a way that is not defined by the reproduction of a traditional American iconography, but rather by the introduction of a different visual and iconographic language. As Reyes explains,

You see a hot-rod with a confederate flag... but a lowrider will have the Virgin de Guadalupe, the Mexican-American flag... the portraits if



Emiliano Zapata. Some people may think that it is a bastardization of the Mexican culture, because a lot of people don't know the significance of many of their symbols but [lowriding] maintains those symbols alive — good or bad. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

Here Reyes affirms the importance of this different set of icons for the valorization of their culture. However, Reyes does not understand lowrider subversive intervention only in terms of the introduction of these icons and symbols into their car customization. He moves forward by recognizing the political and economic circumstances that have framed the experiences of young Mexican-American low-riders, their relation with the material world around them, their self-esteem, as well as their sense of cultural pride and history. As he explains:

I always marvel how some 16 year old can spray-paint the *soldadera* [a Mexican Revolution female soldier] in top of the hood of a car. It is unbelievable. It is art! When you have a 16 year old, that has nothing going on for them. But, somehow [they] are able to put together this script of a fine America's dream. It is a source of pride and inspiration. There has been always an unspoken rule of respect [among lowriders] for each other's cars, and lowriding...and a very conscious effort to say, that is the gang style, and this is the lowriding style. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

As we see here, for Reyes, the mastering of multiples visual codes allows lowriders not only to create an object that works as a hybrid of two realities, but also gives them an understanding and awareness of critical cultural, historical, economical, and epistemic circumstances. As Reyes explains, lowriders present themselves as alternatives to those narratives that erase Mexican visual heritage by encapsulating a different and somewhat unexpected landscape of symbols.

The references made by Reyes to the Mexican Revolution in the form of Emiliano Zapata as well as those to the late 1960s farm workers' struggles are recurrent themes of the low-rider reconstruction of a past and the need to re-narrate history. This is also particularly important in the use of the *Soldadera*, a brave woman who must fight for her community, especially because it has been used as a feminist symbol for Chicana emancipation (see Figure 38).

For Reyes, the effort involved in creating lowriders moves their community away from the self-destruction induced by the social violence of gangs and instead promotes 'pride,' 'inspiration,' and 'respect.' It is clear that lowriders are appreciably about a lot more than just cars.



*Figure 38. Images of two different lowrider cars, Soldadera (L) and Emiliano Zapata (R).*

## **LOWRIDERS AND THE ARGUMENT ABOUT A CHICANA/O**

### **COLOR PALETTE**

Determining if there is a Chicana/o color palette may help us understand low-rider color production. In Chapter III, under the section “The Case for a Chicana/o Color Genealogy,” we explored the multiple players present around the issue of color in the Chicana/o community. At the theoretical level, after studying what Chicana/o artists have to say about this topic, it was concluded that there were no basis to argue the existence of a fixed color palette with this community. In the best case, we talk about the incidence of particular colors between certain artists, or car clubs, or in a particular historical period, but not as a recurrent and clearly established element that defines this community. At that time, we discussed how there was no evidence that those chromatic recurrences were the product of an innate ‘cultural’ distinction of the community at large, but rather the contrived product of multiple economical, political, historical, and stylistic

agents. We even explored how in many cases, misunderstanding, and prejudice about Latina/os have worked the discourses of color in order to perpetuate fixed assumptions about the exotic Other.

When confronted with this question, almost all low-riders interviewed rejected the notion that there was a Chicana/o color palette, based on the arguments that this assumption contradicts their everyday experience in selection and use of colors for cars. As they say, their experience as Latinos is one in which color has no limits, and a Chicana/o palette, if any, was part of the past. Johnny Lozoya says,

We Latinos have learned to be free with the expression of color... Now, it is a non-stop, an explosion of color, [and] a cornucopia of color. This explosion is an expression of the growth as a community, as individuals. Because we are thinking outside the box... There is no box, no limits... I think this is what it is. We were in a box, ... our colors were black, dark blue, browns... but now it is a rainbow of colors, of design... without limits. (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

For Lozoya, in terms of color, the variety of options available and the multiplicity of uses and combination represent an element of emancipation. For him color expression is a sign of the community advancement, as they have freed themselves from dark to light. In this new chromatic reality, there are no limits. Color expression is paired with social emancipation, as a synonymous with the power that Chicana/os can use to create an entirely different space.

Most low-riders interviewed reject the arguments of a unified color palette because, in their opinion, it implies a notion that Chicana/os and low-riders are a homogenous community, and dilutes individuality. This approach is clearly in contrast with modernist approaches, as expressed in the International Style, that propose a rigid and rigorous color palette. For low-riders, being unique is one of the core components of self-expression. Danny D, a lowrider painter says that there is no Chicano palette, “because it is all about the individual” and each car is different, “it is always a different story” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Johnny Lozoya argues that “you don’t want to be uniform... you want to have your own identity and color allows that to happen” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). The existence of a limited palette goes against individuality. Moreover, for Ruben Reyes, a fixed color palette limits the possibilities of low-riders as painters, and constrains the chromatic narrative of the car, by rejecting the individual and imposing a collective self.

I never hear that Latinos prefers certain color schemes. I disagree with that because the diversity of colors in lowriders are fun, because there is a wide diversity within the way we feel, see, think, and do, within the Chicano community. It implies that we [Latinos] are monolithic, that we only think in one way... We [take] a car and we convert it into something that is ours. We have own our own imagination. Why would we limit ourselves, by saying it can only

be red, or it can only have this? (personal communication,  
March 31, 2011)

In Reyes's case, color is tied to the individual unique experience, and therefore a palette is perceived as a reflection of people's unique lives. Luis Miranda, a long time low-rider painter claims that the existence of color differentiation in his experience is the product of differences based on skin color and personality. In his opinion, lighter skinned car owners require different colors in their cars than those car owners of darker skin. Everything in the car paint job is paired to the owner. In his case, the color distinctions come to exist because he chooses different colors for each group.

Miranda explains, "yes, there are color [differences] for Latinos and color... for Caucasians. Not because they have a [different] palette, but rather because the colors I choose for them are different between a Latino and a White person." Furthermore, Miranda adds, "color means something. It is tied to a person... sometimes is about skin color. It is custom[ized] to the person... The colors that I choose to use in a Latino are not going to work in a Caucasian [owned] car. Whites are not going to like it... I need to choose [a different] one for them."

Miranda's comments reveal more about his (the painter's) interpretation and relationship to color than the owner's. He is the one defining what colors are the appropriate ones to fit a client. For Miranda, color is intimately with the car and the owner. As he says, "[My] color decisions change from person to person" (personal communication, March

08, 2011). Precisely because color is understood as an essential and constitutive element of a person and of the car, the idea of a fixed palette is not appropriate. For Miranda, color differentiation has no race boundaries, because there are also Latinos with light skin.

However, when confronted with questions about lowriders as identifiers of a Latina/o and Chicana/os expression, the responders were more inclined to argue in favor of the existence of visual differences — not based on the selection of colors but in the composition as well. In other words, for them, the association between objects and spaces with the Chicana/o community is not the consequence of the colors per se, but rather because of the ways that those colors are placed together in dialogue with the other design components. It is the final overall product that identifies the community or a particular car club. Style is perceived simultaneously as a unifying element and as a differentiator.

Consequently, Miranda (personal communication, March 08, 2011), argues that “yes... it is because the style, and the color within the style... [But, it] is also about shape and lines, and the symbols we use. We are going to represent a particular race. They [those watching] know to whom those cars belong to. It is implied.” Furthermore, he believes that it is “the style [of the car] can tell you if the owner is a Latino” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). For us, Miranda’s observations are significant because they confirm low-rider awareness of the social politics in a way that correlates visual compositions with race. In other words, low-riders understand that by

the use of their particular Low n' Slow style, they publicly acknowledge racial affiliation with all of its attendant implications.

At this point, it is important to remember that the Low n' Slow style is a compound of multiple elements of car customization, and it draws upon a wealth of other cultural components such as clothing, tattoos, hair styles, language, music and hand gestures, etc. In other words, it is not just the cars, but lowrider style is constructed upon other products and practices that abound in the world around those cars. As Paul Willis (2000) has explained, the creation of complex signifiers, comes as a product of "passing and forming of meaning through a human moment, with enduring and forming effect on both form and sense" (p. 130), in a way that the meaning of objects is never created in isolation, but as a sum of significations that accumulate and change over time, and are always in context. Using Willis' concept of homology (1978) as introduced in his book *Profane Culture* and positioned in the context of lowriders, their Low N' Slow style is created by the common resonances that connect and link all the objects about the practices of car customization in a way that they are totally unified and consistent. As Willis explains, these consistent resonances are created by the "objective possibilities" (p 198-201) and boundaries that define subculture in the first place as distinctive and unique entities. Style in this case is affected by the limitation and possibilities available to the subculture. Willis' concept may help us to understand how it is that custom cars, such as hot-rods and lowriders, became so distinctive even when both of them have a similar



origin in time and place. In this case, aesthetic differentiation is influenced by the different possibilities available by economical and racial conditions that differentiate both groups.

Therefore, it is essential to understand how low-rider aficionados understand style, and how they are able to relate it to their history and chromatic productions. In order to deconstruct lowrider color words and the multiples components around the methodology used to design a lowrider paint job, it is important to first analyze their notion of style.

### **LOWRIDERS AND LOW N' SLOW AS A STYLE**

The first argument presented by low-riders to justify their visual productions is the idea that they are carrying on a long tradition into the present, one that links them to their past. In this case, style emerges on account of a unique relationship between the owner and the car. Preserving their past is interpreted as essential in order to preserve their culture and prevent cultural disappearance. In this case, the car serves the function of reproducing a particular collection of events. Low n' Slow style is utilized to re-tell a history, a history that in some cases has nothing to do with a chronological sequence of verified events, but rather a visual opportunity to tell a story and be unique in their own terms. For a marginalized community, the ability 'to tell' is essential. When asked about the process used to make design decisions during lowrider production, Johnny Lozoya argues that,

The first step in an actual [design] plan is to develop a relationship with a vehicle. This relationship happens to us [Latinos] going back to the decorated *carretas y los caballos* [horse wagons]... back hundred of years, with the intention to attract the opposite sex... to the *placitas*... [little town/village squares] and moving from one town to another (personal communication, March 23, 2011).

In my opinion, Lozoya's point of view is particularly important, not necessarily because of the accuracy of the historical events — for example about the lowrider connection to wagons — as much for the inside information that he offers with respect to the intuitive connection created between lowriders and other cruising practices from the past. Furthermore and as Lozoya explains, “the first step in an actual [design] plan is to develop a relationship with a vehicle” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). Only after that personal connection has been established is it possible to move forward with the rest of the customization. This core intimate relation with the car inspires and directs all the other decisions that affect the car. As Lozoya, explains, this intimate relationship with the car emerges not just by a revival of an ancient history but also with immediate memories.

[Lowriders] began with their interest, their love for the actual type of vehicle. Then, they develop an association especially with the older vehicles, that have [been] primarily a more sentimental value to them, with their memories of their families growing up, or their

grandfather's car... as a precious antique... what I call a precious metal. (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

This personal relation with the cars is repeated over and over in speaking with low-riders. It is manifested by the color used, by the graphic selected, and by the construction of narratives around their car. For Danny D, the relation with the car and its implication to color is obvious and highly personal. "I used to have a car in purple, because it reminded me of my mom, her name was Violet" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). For Duarte his personal relationship to his past is manifested in his truck's mural of a mine, because,

It ties me to my hometown of Superior [Arizona] where there were miners. I grow up with miners. I worked in the mines. I grow up underground in the mines. So, I put it in my truck to say this is what I am. It is my heritage. (personal communication, March 19, 2011)

In Duarte's experience, personal relation to mining, as shown in the Figure 39, has defined the graphics of the car, but also the colors used (red and metallic copper), as well as the paint techniques, which utilized the application of gold and copper leaf to the truck. The vehicle became a canvas with which to tell his personal history and relation to Arizona as a miner. As David Morgan (1998) notes "images serve... in the creation of personal and family narratives or of an understanding of the relation to their past... The image comes to stand as a collective representation of personal relationship or community" (p. 206).



*Figure 39. Photo showing a detail from Jesse Duarte's lowrider car. This paint job represents the painter's interpretation of mining in Superior, Arizona. The calaberas (skulls), a typical iconographic element of the Mexican Americans, are represented as miners.*

The murals, such as Duarte's, presented in the low-riders retell stories of survival and manifest their resilience to their own communities as a way to empower and defeat the persistent legacies of historical hegemony. According to Morgan (1998), "memory is neither an innocent retrieval nor a private act [...] but an essentially social and engaged one" (p. 47). In this case, the memory of individual work is used to build a collective memory. Here the imprinting of the mining mural allows the individual to become mutually shared by the community, as a way to also "ensure uniformity and

secure traditions” (Pentcheva, 2006, p. 639) within the entire lowrider and Chicana/o Community.

For Richard Ochoa, Latina/o and Chicana/o personal relationship to lowriders is historical and serves to connect their past to their present. (personal communication, March 30, 2011) Furthermore, for him the longstanding practice of parading is directly connected to lowrider cruising, because “when a guy builds a car, he is parading. It is his art in wheel that he is parading. Today’s lowriders are like wagons with flowers.” For him, lowriders today allow Chicana/os to continue an ancient tradition. However, this act of parading-cruising also directly related to their socio-political situation as a marginalized community, one that exposes lowriders to the experience of forced acculturation and their fight for autonomy. He says,

Some guys may say ‘I don’t want the attention, I just want to blend.’

But, if they have a lowrider they cannot blend-in. Because a lowrider does not allow you to blend in... You don’t keep a low profile by painting your car pink... This is like switching the light on, and say, ‘this is me...catch me if you can. *Aquí estoy y no me voy* (I’m here and

I’m going nowhere). (personal communication, March 30, 2011)

I contend that Ochoa’s observations about those not wanting “to blend,” “switching the light on you” and “catch me if you can” fit very well with Binnie’s (1997) arguments regarding the power of camp aesthetics as a means for resistance and as a way to create counter spaces for self-affirmation. Like Binnie, Ochoa understands the Low n’ Slow aesthetics as a

way to contest the rigid constraints of “blending” in order to represent their racial, moral, and social realities (see Figure 40).

It is important to frame this context and consider the implications of lowrider cruising in an over-racialized urban space, one that also has a prevalent presence of police and racial profiling. The conscious act of cruising in an environment with a strong likelihood of having “the light switched on you” (R. Ochoa, personal communication, March 30, 2011), represents not an act of naïveté, but rather an act of bravery and self-determinism with deep social and legal repercussions. This is a risk that, as Luis Miranda explains, is necessary because, “[if] we attract the police, we also attract everybody else” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). In other words, the price for visibility is also vulnerability. Recognition by the police also means visual broadcasting to many. Being able to bring attention to them is essential to tell their story. Danny D, a lowrider painter, argues that low-riders are “attention whores” (personal communication, March 04, 2011), and their visual car customizations must be understood as their longing for attention. This need for attracting others is not based exclusively in the desire for attention as the ultimate goal.

The bright colors, the over-the-top images, the car jumping, and the velvet interiors are used as a way to be noticed, but it is also a way to create a safe space for their community. Being extremely loud on a visual level makes one also extremely evident, therefore, any attack or act of Otherization is also magnified. It becomes part and parcel of the public domain. Extreme

visibility, especially as a group, may serve as a tool of protection. As Jesse Duarte explains, “when you look at lowriders... you look at the colors and they are loud... if they are not loud and bright, it is not a lowrider” (personal communication, March 19, 2011). In this case, being visually loud is a requisite to belonging to the group. It is within this line of thought that Luis Miranda argues “color is very important because that will made the car stand out more,” and therefore, is imperative to have “color combinations that are non common” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). In his case, car color is essential because it defines the level to which it can reflect an individuals and/or their community.



*Figure 40. Low-riders turn the gaze to themselves as an act of 'bravery' and power. Notice the eyes painted in the back of the car, as it the car says, "I'm looking at you!"*

Furthermore, Bugs contends that what differentiates lowriders from hot-rods is that “there are no rules, we [lowriders] over-exaggerate our paints and graphics, ... [we have] wild pinstriping.” This ‘no-rules’ approach in addition to the desire of being loud and shocking is what he calls the Low n’ Slow style. A style that is theirs and it “is completely different. [Because], we are not afraid of expressing ourselves with our color, graphics, our interiors, murals” (personal communication, March 11, 2011). This chaotic lowrider visual effect is shocking for the untrained eye and for those who encounter lowriders for the first time. In my opinion, however, the reality is that the choice of those colors, patterns, graphics, and shapes is not as randomly selected as has been indicated in the past; on the contrary, they are highly monitored and controlled in order to maximize and ensure the final outcome. All the variety of textures, color, and shapes are unified to create a cohesive narrative. This is what allows Danny D to argue that in a lowrider, “the inside and the outside [of the car] cannot fight each other. There needs to be a balance” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). In this case, the outside refers to the graphics, colors, and overall paint jobs, while the inside refers to the upholstery, the mechanical customizations, and the accessories (Sage, personal communication, March 04, 2011).

The concept of balance has a significant impact in lowrider cars, especially in regards to the selection of colors and the material available for the interior or upholstery (see Figure 41). Luis Miranda argues that when looking to colors and pigments to paint a car, “there is endless number of



colors available” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). However, this is not the case when a painter is trying to find upholstery to match those colors and to mediate a balance between inside and outside. As he explains, a good painter plans ahead and is capable of envisioning a car in its totality and in manner detailed, enough to know what kind of material will be used for upholstery before committing to a particular color, effect, or pattern.

He says, “because I know those troubles, I am already thinking about the upholstery... we look for materials in other industries [such as] boats or furniture in order to have more choices” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). Balance is perceived as the design element that unifies a car project and achieves a sense of cohesion among all the components of its customizations.

For Luis Miranda, this is why it is not uncommon to hear a car owner say, “I don’t like the color [of the car], but the car is beautiful.” For him, it is this balance created by the painter that allows for individual parts (that do not possess appeal as separate elements) to become beautiful when put together an entirely unified project. This is not always easy because, in some cases, the painter is not the same person as the upholsterer. In those cases, it is imperative for the owner to maintain control over the entire car customization and its balance with advice from the car club. Therefore, paint jobs are intrinsically connected to the shape and manufacturer’s specifications of the car. In many ways, this constitutes a system of organized chaos. This involves a process in which all the parts are carefully selected,

customized, and in matched. In the next section, I want to explore how color is manipulated, understood and put into play as part of the visual narrative of the car as one unified entity.



*Figure 41. Image of a local lowrider car that shows that what may first appear chaotic and disorganized actually follows a strict method of selection. As defined by low-riders, there is a 'balance' that ties the composition of the car.*

#### **A. The Value of Color and Color Selection in Lowriders.**

Color is quintessentially important to low-riders. This is evident not just in the level of workmanship dedicated to the selection and implementation of color in their cars or their interest in exploring and experimenting with different pigments, textures, and color shades, but also in the attention given to the relationship that color has with the car, its owner,

the community, and the place. After talking with many low-riders, it became evident that their relationship with color is a highly complex one.

The color of a lowrider is for Danny D., “influenced by the person, the club, the territory, the type of car, and what is trendy in lowriding” (personal communication, March 04, 2011) at any given time. For him, color is not a fixed feature; it changes and adapts as it is influenced by multiple elements. As we will see, in this coming section, based on their comments, low-riders’ understanding and relationship with color varies according to different layers of interaction, defined predominantly by relationships between the car owner, the car club, and the painter. As we will see, low-riders tend to believe that for each car model, there are particular sets of ‘fitting’ colors meant for it. Those colors are defined based on the car model, the body style, and the personality of the owner. In this coming section, I will explain each one of these categories to understand the complexity of the arguments surrounding color in lowriders.

Danny D argues that, “painting a car is like doing a tattoo on somebody... Because the car is very personal, color is very important” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). In this case, low-riders perceive color as an essential element of the customization of a car, and as a way to identify its uniqueness. This is why, for Jesse Duarte, lowrider car owners must “try to match the flow of the car with a color... in a way that everything flows together” (personal communication, March 19, 2011). The concept of

bringing out a car identity and translating it into an appropriate color is essential for low-riders, and a pivotal argument of lowrider painters.

For many of the interviewees, the car-owner color relationship changes over time as the same car-owner pair — under differing circumstances, at various moments — may require a different color combination because they have grown and changed. Luis Miranda says a paint car job's life expectancy, "depends of when you did [it]... It is not the same if you are a teen or an adult. The car changes as the person... they [have] outgrown the car, not necessarily the color" (personal communication, March 08, 2011). As individuals mature, their relationship with their car changes and evolves as well. Therefore, the color used to express that relationship may adjust to represent newer realities. For Miranda, color comes after car-owner relationship and in consequence of that relationship.

For Sage, "you cannot forget about history. Old Cars... you must paint them as classic cars, with classic colors, not modern colors. There is need to be in historical balance" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Keeping this chromatic 'balance' is perceived as vital in order to avoid visual misunderstanding and miscommunication. In the interviews, the concept that color modifications over time as result of changes in individual person-car relationships was extrapolated to the collective. Over time, the lowrider community changes its relationship with cars as well (Chevy, personal communication, April 11, 2011). For example, in his 1970s low-riders, Johnny Lozoya preferred to use deep solid orange colors, whereas in the

1980s he preferred the color blue, with a ‘candy’ effect, which is a clear layer of lacquer car paint that gives the car a sugary transparent glaze. Today, candy effects are not as popular as before because of the complexity and high level of work involved. Several low-riders interviewed, including Lozoya, Ochoa, Garcia and Duarte, agree that red (including variations such as magenta and pink) is the most popular color in lowrider cars today. Lozoya adds that “most people want colors that attract attention... to highlight, to accent, to support the car bodylines” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). In his opinion, red is the most appropriate choice to accomplish those goals today. Richard Ochoa agrees as well, adding that for him the color blue is second, and pear is third (see Figure 42). He confirms this opinion by stating that,

Working for *Lowrider Magazine*, we [photo] shoot a lot of cars, and the ones that stand out, happen to be, a lot of red ones. If you check the history of [this] magazine, there have been more red cars on the front cover than any other color in the entire life of the magazine. The red cars happen to be the most vibrant of the colors on lowriders. It may go back to the Aztec times, when red its means bravery, power... and blood. (personal communication, March 30, 2011)

Richard Ochoa does not provide any other explanation regarding today’s popularity of red. More research needs to be done to understand if those color variations over time respond to social, economic or technological changes as the color industry develops new pigments and as the mainstream

embrace different tones. It is interesting, however, that low-rider color preferences today diverge notably from mainstream American car color preferences, as shown in the 2010 DuPont's research, where white and grays were the most popular car colors.

It is also intriguing that low-riders have a predisposition to avoid white, gray, and black cars, as we will discuss when referring to car club regulations. It appears that low-riders are consistently avoiding acculturation by rejecting mainstream aesthetic choices. They embrace a decidedly different path for chromatic expression. Such pronounced differentiations in color choices call attention to the research process employed by DuPont, particularly regarding the manner in which they identify and select their research population(s). Keeping in mind that DuPont most likely focuses its interests in new cars and not necessarily on customized ones, the unilateral rejection of mainstream colors by low-riders should not be taken lightly.

Since color has been presented as an intimately defined expression, and one linked to the relationship between car owners and cars, the ability to read and translate those relationships into a chromatic combination is crucial for low-riders. As previously explained, this process of reading and decoding is one of the most important tasks delegated to car painters. Luis Miranda explains, "I see colors in people... For me the colors say a lot about the person... I made the connection between the person, the car, and the color... I read the person" (personal communication, March 08, 2011).



*Figure 42. Photo showing one of many red lowriders, the most popular color in the Low n' Slow movement today.*

As we see from Miranda's point of view, color is an intimate aspect intrinsic to the owner's distinctiveness, not just of the car. This is why for Danny D color is also "defined by the person's life style" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Moreover, for Sage "some people already have a color in themselves... there are blue persons, red persons" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Based on what these painters say, seemingly their task has to do little with painting and much more concerns unveiling people's internal chromatic appropriateness. Here, the act of painting becomes an act of imprinting chromatic identities on people's cars. At the same time, it means that an individual's internal color changes as the self evolves.

For Johnny Lozoya (personal communication, March 23, 2011), color reflects people's soul or spirit. Their cars become amplifiers for those colors. As he explains, "color has to do a lot with the internal spirit of the individual. It has to do with their personality... It is a way to come out of the shell, and express oneself with design patterns." Additionally, design (the process of customizing and altering a car) becomes a cognitive process of translating the immateriality of the spiritual into the material world. Lozoya continues, "color is an expression of your visual voice, the voice of your internal spirit. Design on the other hand has to do with your thinking, where things are integrated." For low-riders, it is during the process of design that the abstract and the concrete are unified, and establishes a sense. The final product, in this case, the customized car, is understood as a picture of the individual, one that brings together the spiritual and the material in totality.

However, the process of design is not limited to the decision of what color will be used to better represent the owner's soul. Low-riders are aware that design is involved in the complete process of car and color customization. Ruben Reyes explains,

It is not just about the color but also about the number of layers of color you are putting in your car. It is red, but it is a different type of red. Because they [the artists] play with the shades, they play with the finish. Is it going to have one tone, [or] two tones? Are you [going to] have metal flakes? Is it going to have pinstriping? Is it going to be subtle, or loud? [Will there be] one color or many different colors?...



You know, [there are] so many decisions. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

As Reyes explains, it is precisely because the complexity of the multiple design color decisions in lowriding that it is important to spend time discussing the position played by painters. It is crucial both to understand the methodology used when making decisions about car customizations and color, and to explore to what extent the painter defines the aesthetic components of the car.

The task is not an easy one as it requires to take into consideration the role played by car clubs in recommending or promoting different painters, as well as how car clubs create restrictions or design standards, which limit the degree to which the painter can intervene in the modification of a car. In addition, other aspects such as money, place, marketing strategies, and gender performance all work together as essential components in the construction of a car's visual narrative.

### **B. The Lowrider Painter: Decision Making and their Use of Color.**

Lowrider car painters are very important in the Low n' Slow movement. Their interaction with the car owners is essential. This is why Johnny Lozoya defines, "the relationship between the owner and the painter is like a marriage... You want to find someone that you want to trust, someone you want to invest... you trust that they will comprehend your idea" (personal communication, March 23, 2011). Each painter is different, as each

one possesses a unique visual identity. As Richard Ochoa describes, “you can identify a car painter by their design and color choices” (personal communication, March 30, 2011). Consequently, the decision by the owner regarding who will paint the car will have profound and lasting effects on the car, the relationship with car clubs, and with the community at large.

However, the importance and relevance of lowrider painters have changed over time, just as lowrider cars, the practices around them, and the technological requirements have changed. Sometimes, this shift in the owner-car relationship is the product of the increased specificity needed in order to introduce particular types of paint effects, hydraulics, and upholstery. In other words, these changes reflected deeper changes around the marketing of lowriding in general, especially with regard to what is expected from a lowrider in order to compete successfully in a car show. As explained before, what we understand as a lowrider, what is expected from a customized car today differs appreciably from lowriders of twenty or forty years ago. It is not just about technology, but it has to do also with the core definition of what is a lowrider, and how that definition is allied with notions of creativity, uniqueness, and craftsmanship (see Figure 43).

Some, like Johnny Lozoya, argue that lowrider customization remains essentially the work of the car owner, since s/he is the one managing all the process, even when he may not be the one painting the car. He says, “I think that a custom car is a canvas that you create, as an artist... make no mistake, the owner of the car is an artist. He is a director. He is a creator. The painter

is a tool, an assistant, a contributor... but the vehicle is the owner's canvas" (personal communication, March 23, 2011).



*Figure 43. Figure showing two images of a pinstriping painter, as he measures and paints a lowrider car.*

His argument is congruent with the idea that because of the complexity of the process of car customization and the multiple parts involved, someone (in this case, the car owner) must remain as the central decision maker. This is especially so as lowrider customization implies the interaction of a significant number of players: the painter, the upholsterer, the car body mechanic, as well those involved in the introduction of hydraulics, audio, and video elements, and its subsequent the maintenance, transportation, and the design of the display accessories during the shows. However, almost all interviewees explained, that today, lowrider cars for the most part are not painted by the car owner but rather by commissioned painters (see Figure 44).



*Figure 44. Images of a lowrider painter auto shop; the painter is seen working on a car (R).*

As Luis Miranda explains, nowadays, “almost no one paints their cars. Not now. Because there are high standards... Only if you happen to be a painter already” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). As we understand from Miranda’s observations, it is because of the ‘high standards’ needed and expected that the process of car paint customization has been delegated almost exclusively to professional and highly skilled painters. This observation does not imply that there are not lowrider aficionados who paint their own cars today. On the contrary, they do exist, but it is because of the requirements for high standards today that the numbers of individuals executing their own paint jobs have been considerably reduced, particularly as jobs have become quite specialized. As Ochoa explained, there are variations of this trend based on where the low-rider is located, the amount of money and time available for the customizations, as well as the intimate

historical connection the owner has established with a car. For example, the decision of who may modify a previous paint job is not easy, especially if the car owner has close family or car club connections. These changes about who paints the car and the relationships around those car paint jobs are particularly relevant to this research because of the repercussions in the design process, the implementation of a design plan, and the role played by painters in representing the owner chromatic-spirit.

It is important to clarify that here we are not addressing only the changes in the execution of the painting from the car owner to a painter. It is not that the car owner comes with a predetermined and firmly established design in mind, and that the painter reproduces those ideas directly into the car. Rather, this pertains to the implicit assumption that by nature the painter is the only one capable of making and implementing accurate design decisions. As Johnny Lozoya explains, “most people don’t go to the painter with a schematic blue print of the car. They go with a general idea of what they want to see, with a blank canvas, and they expect the painter to be able to transcend what is in their minds into the real world” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). For Bugs, “the problem, most of the time, is that car owners do not know what direction to go. This is why it is important to have an artist to guide you” (personal communication, March 11, 2011). Furthermore, Jessie Duarte argues that most people do not have an idea of the overall color and design they want in their cars, but unconsciously know

that “there is a color that represent them” (personal communication, March 19, 2011) and the painters are there to help them find those colors.

These observations are particularly important because of their implications that the painter is a different type of human, one who has been illuminated and who is capable of not only visually transforming the soul of the owner and the car as one, but also as a person who is also capable of delineating a path of action. These remarkable assumptions are possible because the painter is perceived as possessing supernatural qualities. As will be seen, these myths about painters are in general constructed collectively, but are particularly perpetuated by the painters themselves. The supernatural status of the painters allows them the ability to maintain an essential gatekeeper position with regard to lowrider aesthetics.

The myth of the superiority of the painters portrays them as visual shamans who have the capability to ‘understand’ and connect the world of the celestial with the terrestrial. Here, the painter becomes as Robin Cormack (1997) describes, “an interactive medium between this world and the other” (p. 31). In this case, the painter is portrayed as the one who has the capacity to perceive what is beyond this world, and who has positioned himself as one who is a professional storyteller of people’s lives. In this case, these stories of the individual are perpetuated by social imagery, as part of the ‘*cultura de la raza*.’ As, as Robin Cormack (1997) observes, “the painters... maintain the traditions and memory” of the community (p. 29), essential for the survival of that community. Furthermore, the social recognition of the painter is tied

to idea that as spiritual beings, they can translate that status to the pieces they create. As Joseph Leo Koerner (1993) argues, “the myth of an image, ‘not made by human hands’ serves here to articulate an idea of the quasi-divine powers of the individual artist” (p. 106), in a circular system that is self-validated and recognizes the centrality of the painter. Such supernatural qualifications are well explained, in Jessie Duarte observations that the “painters are the visionaries” capable of reading and translating “the feelings of the car... The painter is the one that puts together the style, the patterns, and the type of color... They envision the car for you” (personal communication, March 19, 2011). The painter Luis Miranda says, “we are the guys that see it in our heads... We shape it... They [the car owners] need to let us be in charge... The artist is going to paint you the way he sees you” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). In this case, the painter captures and imprints something that is not visible to mortals, something that is created in his head, a picture of the end product, one intended solely for that particular car and individual.

The process of ‘reading’ and ‘envisioning’ a car is not a clear one; the painter almost purposely leaves the nature of such a process as ambiguous. We know that it is something that happens internally within the painter. As Miranda has explained, “I look at the car and the owner personality... and I get a picture in my head” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). In many ways, it is very similar to the design process. However, something particularly interesting happens here as this process becomes a constant one

of design reevaluation of the painter's 'personality readings.' The way it unfolds in this arena of artistic production is that this reading of the personality does not occur only once at the beginning of the design process, but rather it is something that develops throughout job. Luis Miranda asserts that during the time that he is conducting his paintwork he is also building a relationship, and he is "constantly reading the person... his lifestyle" a process that allows him to add to his "color choosing for [the client]" (personal communication, March 08, 2011). This constant evaluation process implies that the final concept or idea is not fully actualized until the car is finished because the owner's lifestyle or social conditions may change during the course of the car paint project.

With the painters deciding most of the aesthetic elements in the cars, there is reason to wonder how the painters perceive the input by car owners and how much are they willing to follow their advice and recommendations. After interviewing a variety of painters, it became clear that the painter's rank and status within in the lowrider community is a defining factor in how they approach their clients' point of view. Newer or more novice painters tend to follow the instructions of the owner in greater detail. In those cases, fulfilling the owner's requests is imperative. As a painter builds his client base, his popularity and credibility grows within the community stabilizing his possibilities of more work. (see Figure 45).





*Figure 45. Photos of prizes and trophies at a car show in Phoenix, AZ.*

For those who are veterans or seasoned painters, the story is different. As a painter rises in popularity and fame, his more secured status allows greater license thereby allowing him to be more demanding. The longer a painter remains active in the craft, creating new pieces, improving his technique, and learning how to ‘read and translate’ cars’ and owners’ personalities, the easier it becomes for him to impose his vision or reading about a particular car. For example, Danny D, one of the best known contemporary painters, jokingly says, “the customer is always right, to the extent that they do what I want... They think that they know what they want, but they don’t... not until I tell them what they want” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). Clearly, the social capital created over time provides a painter with the power to ensure the establishment of his own vision and, ultimately, his painting style. Magazine recognition, car show’s prizes, and car club networks amplify a painter’s social capital.

Luis Miranda explains in detail the logic that justifies why, in his opinion, painter aesthetic decisions must prevail over those of the owner, and the notion that car owners have no ideas of their own. He explains,

I made the decisions for the car owner. [The difference is that] the car owner does his decisions based on what he sees [that] everybody else is doing, which means what I am [already] doing... He looks to all my jobs, and from all these jobs, he decides. He does not do what I can do... pick it up from the air... from the car, from the owner personality. They get their ideas from others, from what they see. But, I don't do that. I get my ideas from... my head, from the color palette in my head... in my inspiration. It gets into my head and a transformation happens. (personal communication, March 08, 2011)

Miranda's point of view is clear: the car owner is positioned in a different level of aesthetic awareness. His decision making is based on material that has been already created by the painter or other painters; therefore, it is already obsolete. Such decisions are based on copying previous work and will not distinguish the car or the owner from other low-riders. Car owners who mimic other people's work remain stuck in old imagery and therefore at a certain level. From Miranda's perspective, he and other lowrider painters reside at a different level, with an advantaged relationship with the creative world. By their artistic nature and vision, they can create new things that do not yet exist. They can unveil 'that' special paint job meant for that car, and that owner personality. For Bugs, lowrider painters are those who by their

definition are “always thinking outside the box. You [as an painter] need to tell your clients... because your neighbor has and loves only black cars, doesn’t mean you can’t have a yellow car” (personal communication, March 11, 2011). In this sense, working with a painter ensures uniqueness, individuality, cutting edge, and creative results.

The implications here are that painters can create from *thin air*, because they see and feel what others cannot. It is as if a painter steals the image of the new potential car from a mystical place that only the painter can reach. Jessie Duarte, says

That is why they are artists... People go to them, because you can go and tell them something and they can read what you want. Plus... they are into that [lowrider] culture. They are into that type of style of paint. They can develop something different... bring something that you say, WOW! I did not think about that!... I think 90% is the painter, and 10% is probably you [the car owner]. (personal communication, March 19, 2011)

Certainly, as Duarte explains, this new place from where painter ‘gets a picture’ of the car design is defined by his creativity, imagination, level of craftsmanship, and his mastery of telling stories through symbols, in a way that is recognized by the community. As artists, lowrider painters achieve a different level of power within the community; they gain social capital. However, in spite of the glamour associated to being a painter, the work is not easy to accomplish.

As Sage puts it, “painting a car is like having a baby. There is a lot of stress factor. Because anything wrong can happen, at anytime! There is a lot of time and money, and everything else involved” (personal communication, March 04, 2011). In many ways, the “stress factor” to which Sage refers is compounded because of the unreliability of their type of work, as the number of clients are not consistent, and therefore perceived quality and the degree of the uniqueness of their work represents the painters’ only accreditation in the lowrider community.

### **C. The car painter’s inspiration.**

As we will see in this section, when asked about where they get their inspiration, lowrider painters vary in their responses. Predominantly they will say that this happens as result of their vigilant and multifaceted observations of their surroundings, their desire to learn and experiment, and by never being hesitant to explore new grounds, new techniques, new materials, and new chromatic combinations. They will argue that their inspiration is tied to the painter awareness and sensibility about his lowrider identity. For Luis Miranda, a lowrider painter, “inspiration comes from nature, animals... from nature’s color choices, like in a beautiful flower or a tropical bird” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). For Bugs (personal communication, March 11, 2011), another painter, this design sensibility that is interjected is a long and careful process that never stops, “colors... they require a long time to build an eye for them. Me, I am always studying color.

One of the best places to study color is a fashion show, or the mall. I look of how people dress, how ladies dress... I go to Las Vegas. I always look for books about color.” Furthermore, he recognizes how his visual studies are not limited to the world of low-riders, since it also includes the study of what other painters are doing. He explains, “every time I go to a lowrider car show, I study everybody” (personal communication, March 11, 2011). In many ways, the work of lowrider painters requires a constant reevaluation and improvement.

Painters’ reputations are essential for their survival, as is explained by Bugs and Luis Miranda,

I remember all the cars I have done. You are only as good as the last car you did. Reputation is everything. If you don’t try to push yourself to the edge all the time, and be[come] better and better, you have lost it. (Bugs, personal communication, March 11, 2011)

Every car [I paint]... a try to do my best... do better... as I move to the next one, I always try to improve, always moving forward. I cannot get stuck in the past.... This is why I don’t like to get stuck in one color...

My biggest impact in my work is my dedication to improve, to do always better. (L. Miranda, personal communication, March 08, 2011)

By constantly adapting, embracing new techniques, and creating new trends, lowrider painters are capable of remaining in top of their game. It is interesting to notice here how color and the use of color is perceived as one of those elements that allows for re-invention, in a way that the painter can

always present himself as fresh and new, by avoiding 'get stuck' or labeled as out of date.

Most painters do not have a formal portfolio with images of all the paintwork they have done, so they rely heavily in the word-of-mouth and client/car club references. In many ways, car shows work as a galleries and showcases for their work. It is in those car shows that painters gain more exposure and collective public visibility as the place where their paintwork on several cars may be displayed simultaneously. In many cases, car shows, especially those with national recognition, are perceived as 'deadlines,' since many car-owners will want their cars displayed there. Car shows, as an educational tool, serve as venues where to view the latest lowrider custom car and learn the latest trends. Last year's car show may well be already too old and late. The shocking effect of a new paint technique or technological improvement is also ephemera and can provide but a limited number of trophies and recognitions before such ideas are reproduced by others. As a result, the community interest for it often fades away. For Sage, the work of dissemination that clients do for him by showing his customizing work in a car show is very important because "they do the advertising for you. It is also an investment for the artist" (personal communication, March 04, 2011). This is why it is essential especially at the beginning of the painter's career to be able to be exposed to and recognized by the community and to become differentiated from other car painters by trying new techniques and methods for visual differentiation (see Figure 46).

When asked about what differentiates their paintwork from other painters, most lowrider painters make references to their work quality, their ability to read the car-owner identity, and their years of experience.

Recognition can be interpreted as a double sided sword: car painters want to be remembered and identifiable by their innovating qualities, but they also avoid to be associated by rigid visual productions, or as an painter who does not evolve and one who keep repeating the same work over and over.

Bugs says,

When you see one of my paint jobs, you know it was me who did it.

Because of my colors, my designs, and how I layer out the colors. I do not brag about a car. I let the car speak for it self... I try to be different,

to have my own identity. (personal communication, March 11, 2011)

On the other hand, you have painters, like Luis Miranda, who will argue the contrary, "I don't have a style... each one of my paint jobs is different"

(personal communication, March 08, 2011). In his case, the fact that he cannot be labeled is evidence that he is constantly redefining himself and never allows himself to be trapped in repetitions. As he stated previously, this is why he rejects being 'stuck in one color.'

Referring to the relationships among color, painters, and car-owners, most low-riders who were interviewed tended to agree about two main areas where most of the problems arise during the process of customization of a car. One conflict area is the expectation with respect to the quality of the painter's work. Johnny Lozoya says, "most of the problems come not because

of the color [the painter has chosen] but rather [because]... the painter was not really that good... [It is] more about the flaws they did with the paint... the artist technique” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). When asked about this, several low-riders talked about the lack of resources needed to cover all the expenses involved in car customizations.

Low-riders argue that if one has the money needed, one can get a very good painter. If resources are limited, owners will be forced to lower standards. Consequently, owners have to resort to painters who are new, emerging, and inexperienced. Some of the money problems arise, for example, when a car owner commissions a paint work, but half way into the process his monetary situation changes and he is unable to pay the painter in full. In such cases, the paintwork stops and the painter will hold the car until a satisfactory agreement is reached.

In many ways, money defines which painter that car owners can afford, which car club they can join, which paint job they can commission, and even what color(s) can be used. For Luis Miranda it is very simple, “color become a money issue, because the brighter colors, and the ideas I have, cost money” (personal communication, March 08, 2011). Furthermore, Bugs explained the influence of money in these terms, “don’t be cheap... coolness cost money... the question is, how cool [do] you want your car to be? (personal communication, March 11, 2011).





*Figure 46. Images showing three examples of experimental painting techniques. The color effects are generated by using water, oils, and textiles in combination with traditional painting. Experimenting with new effects is crucial for lowrider painters.*

The more specialized the interventions around car customization have become, the higher relevancy the influence of money. By their comments, it is evident that the lowrider painters understand the value associated to their level of specialization. Their ideas and skills about car

paints and motifs are translated into social recognition, and the resulting increased opportunities allow them to demand a higher price for their work.

### **COLOR AS A GENDERED ELEMENT IN LOWRIDERS**

During my research, I did not encounter any female painters. Nevertheless, women have always been present in the Low n' Slow movement and at different levels, such as car owners, as partners, as friends or family, as car models, or as inspiration for graphics. However, the overwhelming disparity in the numbers of female and male car club members certainly demonstrates one of the most contingent aspects in lowriding: it is a male-centered experience with limited access for women in highly prescribed roles.

Denise Sandoval, in the book, *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2002) explores examines women's representation in *Lowrider Magazine*, and the sexualization of women as car models in lowrider car shows. I believe that considerably more research is needed in this area, especially because most of the writing is largely focused in one area: the victimization of women. This singular focus seems to deny that women play other, albeit limited roles as well. It is true, lowriders, as hyper-masculine spaces, have created an exclusionary and oppressive environment for many women. However, we must acknowledge the resiliency of women for adaptability and survival — especially under conditions of oppression and limited resources. This

includes their right to their bodies and their sexuality. Narrowly-framed discourses that focus only on victimization of the individual do not create an accurate picture of women's experience and capacity; instead, it largely constrains and limits our understanding of their capabilities and resilience.

My interest is to explore how the use of color is tied to discourses of gender and sexuality, as it is utilized to promote, subjugate, or impose gender expressions. As we will see, lowrider discourses on gender tend to navigate around notions of female/male dichotomies that are fixed to particular colors or graphics. In addition, gender will be analyzed as it relates to the notion that cars are female entities. Finally, the notions of machismo as it is expressed in the concept of a 'family man' in their community will be explored.

For Johnny Lozoya, the issue of lowrider customizations is tied to the notions of manhood because it is connected to the idea of being macho, a manly man, and a strong family man. Lozoya perceives low-riders' ability to create illusions through their car customizations, as a form of machismo. Their strength is their talent to seduce as well as protect others with their chromatic choices and expressions.

They [lowriders] are macho men... They can dazzle somebody with a real beautiful solid color that does a bold statement, or they can do it with a multicolor car... This is what a call an illusion. They create an illusion. That is their strength. This is where the machismo comes in...

This is their strength too, their creativity! It is not just about the

selection of color, but in their creativity, in the power to creating an illusion. (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

For Lozoya, low-riders use their capabilities to distract and seduce and to reinforce their macho status. In many ways, it can be argued that by mastering the creative, lowrider men are capable of achieving a measure of control over their surroundings. In environments marked by subjugation and poverty, the creation and mastering of alternative narratives and visual spaces can be seen as representative of the ultimate act of control over their destiny and their families. Throughout their customizations, low-riders are able to protect their community's identity and cultural values. The low-rider, as a *macho* and a *caballero*, is one who cares for his people (see Figure 47).



Figure 47. Two examples of how heterosexuality is normalized as the dominant discourse between relationship of domination (L) and as a male, that is, a *caballero* (R) that protects, holds, and narrate his-story in his terms.

Low-riders are very passionate about the idea that colors, graphics, and car customizations come to exist as a result of the individual personality of the car owners and their relationship to their car. According to Bugs,

I look for people's personality... [I try to find] a color that matches their particular personality... For example for a macho biker, I am not going to give him a "fairy" car. I will give him a solid bike with solid pinstriping... I'm going to give him something that make a statement for him... you have to. (personal communication, March 11, 2011)

As Bugs explains, color is tied to particular gender expression, for him personality as a gender expression is linked to shapes and type of customizations. A macho biker, as a hyper-masculine individual, cannot (in the painter's opinion) have a car that questions his assumed heterosexuality. He cannot drive around with a car that is too queer or 'fairy.'

The relationship between color and gender becomes particularly interesting when different low-riders and painters discuss the color pink. Richard Ochoa (personal communication, March 30, 2011) noticed, "is it not interesting? That the car that most represents the pioneering beginning of this car sport [lowriding] was covered with flowers... with a bright pink interior." Here Ochoa, refers to Jesse Valadez's famous 1963 Impala, *Gypsy Rose*, a car that has been considered by many as the car that placed lowriders onto the American radar when it was featured in the 1970s NBC sitcom *Chico and the Man*. This was the first television program set in and around a Mexican-American neighborhood, in this case East Los Angeles. Ochoa's

remarks seemed to be based upon the assumption that pink is not a ‘proper’ color for lowriders because it is not masculine enough (see Figure 4).

As explored in the previous section, magenta and pink, as variations of red, are two of the most popular colors for lowriders today. When asked about how they perceive those particular colors, many low-riders tried to defend the color pink. While they clearly believed that pink was a signifier of femininity, they also considered car customization to be masculine enough to make it acceptable. If there was any conflict between the selection of a color socially defined as feminine and the performance of masculinity through car customization, it was not evident in their conversation. In fact, some rejected pink as feminine at all. For example, Johnny Lozoya defines masculinity by the qualities of strength. For him, pink is not a feminine color because is a “loud” and “bold” color that makes a statement of power and control, which contradicts male centered assumptions about femininity. He says,

No, pink is not a feminine color. Pink is a bright color, a bold color, a loud color that makes a statement, Right? It is an important color [because it] is strong... Using these bright colors, patterns and designs are an expression of our internal self. We are a strong community.

(personal communication, March 23, 2011)

In the case of Lozoya, color works together with all the other design elements to create a stable notion of masculinity, one that embraces the lowrider community as a whole. Here, pink is used to express the internal values of a

self that is strong. For Sage, the use of pink represents a confirmation of lowriders strong and secure masculinity. As he explains,

There [are] a lot a people that will laugh for having a pink car. But there are lots of lowriders that are pink, you know? Only in the lowrider community, you are able to display it and make it look beautiful, that you are proud of it... and it is a manly thing, you know why? Because we are not afraid of it! (personal communication, March 04, 2011)

In Sage's point of view, only men who are secure of themselves and their manhood can feel comfortable to choose a color that has been socially associated with the weaker gender or a queer individual. In this case, their masculinity is reinforced by their bravery as they take the risk of using pink without been afraid of adverse judgments. Of course, the pink car is a work in balance, as it is accompanied by other visual elements traditionally associated with hyper-masculinity, as tattoos, dark clothes, over sexualized images of women, etc. that populate the car (see Figure 48).

Therefore, the color pink is not presented without context; it is situated within the hyper-masculine Low n' Slow environment. Here, the color pink creates an intense contrast and works as a background that amplifies other masculine elements. Their masculinity is not questioned because it overpowers the femininity of pink; in fact, it exaggerates their masculine features in a way that establishes heterosexuality as central to the lowrider experience.



*Figure 48. Photos of two pink lowrider cars, exterior and interior.*

The centrality afforded to heterosexuality as the only mode for masculine expression, as well as the perpetuation of fixed gender performance roles in lowriders, become evident as Lowrider car owners describe the car as a female entity. The discourse here is particularly important because it defines the car as a gendered object and with a female identity. The role of male power is expressed here through underlying notion of property; i.e. cars as women are the property of their male owners. Therefore, as objects (or commodities) for masculine pleasure, cars/women



can be customized, sold, rearranged, shown, and possessed. In this process, they are highly sexualized and fetishized objects.<sup>24</sup> When the car is imagined as a female body, the male obsession with it is immediately heteronormalized; it becomes an expression of sexual attraction, and the fetishism is acceptable. However, should the car be imagined as a male object, it would signify homoeroticism, and in this case, the fetishism would be largely unacceptable within lowrider culture. Luis Miranda adds,

There are no differences between men and women [car paint jobs], because men choose women colors and motives. The car is a female. It is not a male. It is a female... You do not want your car to look masculine, because it is a female... why would you want your car to look masculine? This is another difference with the White community. They [do] not all look at their cars as females... The same [apply] to a woman... the car remains a female, even if a woman [owns it]... the car remains a female as a whole. (personal communication, March 08, 2011)

First, Miranda proposes that cars are female objects, and therefore have female identities. Since the work of the painter is that of translating those identities into visual elements in order to maintain its harmony, cars must, in his point of view, reflect in their customizations as a female identity.

Therefore, independently of who (male or female) is doing the paintwork, or

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed explanation on the multiple forms and meaning of fetishism in objects refer to chapter 9 “The Obsession of Possession: Fetish Objects” in Boradkar, Prasad (2010), *Designing Things*. New York, NY: Berg. p 249-261.

the customization of the car, the car's female identity must remain unaltered. In addition, Miranda, advises against the mistake of trying to have a car that looks masculine not just because it may implies homosexual desires, but also because, as he argues, it represents a distinctive alternative element to mainstream Anglo-Saxon approach to cars. Finally, Miranda plays subtly with the implications that "not all [whites] look at their cars as females," (personal communication, March 08, 2011) — it is as if by making this observation, he reinforces Chicana/o low-riders heterosexual desires.

Some of these points are even clearer when considering the second intervention by Miranda, where the link between car customizations and the fear for homosexual desire is even more evident. Furthermore, he moves forward in regard to the connection that low-riders may develop to their cars, as an object of fetish affection.

In the 40s, all cars' names were female. It is like you are dating another woman. You are not dating a guy! I will not go and sit with a male friend. It [the car] is a female. It is like another wife, another female partner. For a guy, his car is like 'a *sancha*'...my other wife (personal communication, March 08, 2011)

Here, low-riders' affection for the car is described as a heterosexual relationship. For Miranda, the car is not only a female, but it is also a lover, an imaginary "female partner" (see Figure 49), "a *sancha*," a second woman in a man's life; not the wife but the mistress. On many occasions, a *sancha* materializes the desires for the unattainable, the impossible, and the

forbidden. Since low-riders are engaging in a relationship with an animated object, the time, energy, and money invested in it are justifiable. It serves to legitimize a fetishistic relationship as one of authentic affection.



*Figure 49. Two examples of lowrider car, whose owners refer to their cars as females: "Mi güerita" (my little white girl) and "My Baby Nicole." In the first case, the owner refers to his car as his light skinned girl since the car is cream in color.*

Because the car is perceived as a female, the love for her is manifested in the car customizations. Therefore, the money and time expended on the customizations are understood as necessary sacrifices for her. It is important to understand that low-rider's affection for the car as a female is not conceived at the same level as a human affection. They clearly differentiate car-owner relationship from their love for their family or wife. Since cars have been socially constructed as sacred objects in the American psyche, this female 'affair' may be explained as a desire to possess the social values hosted by cars. In this case, it may be that the idea of a car as female also helps

regulate and dissipate the tensions created by homo-social spaces, such as all-males car clubs and lowriding in general.

## **FINDINGS SUMMARY ON LOWRIDER USE OF COLOR**

Several findings have become evident as the result of this research. It is therefore important to review them because they will help us understand the complex relationship that exists between low-riders and their cars. In order to facilitate the understanding, the findings have been divided in four sections: a) lowriding; b) lowrider cars; c) painters and car owners; and d) aesthetics and color use.

### **About Lowriding**

- Lowriding is predominantly a Latina/o Chicana/o cultural expression, particular to the United States experience. Lowrider members believe that their cars allow them to fight against forced enculturation, homogenization, and aesthetic invisibility all the while embracing their reality as Americans car cruisers. Consequently, lowriders should be defined not only in terms of rejection or anti-forced enculturation, but also as part of their process of what it means to be an American.
- Low-riders use their customizations as a way to manifest and express their own personal histories by designing murals with images

about their childhood or by using color(s) that reflect family members or places.

- By way of customizations and cultural practices on their cars, low-riders claim a common ancestral space and place, *Aztlán*, which unifies their community. Furthermore, this action permits low-riders to claim ownership rights over the American Southwest.
- Low-riders are organized between independents and car club members. Clubs are constituted around a variety of elements such as gender, geography, ideology, car models, or aesthetic style. They work as a networked support group that helps their members embrace the multiple tasks involved in lowriding. Some car organizations do not call themselves car clubs but families.
- A lowrider car club's distinctive element is a *placa*, which works as an official signature and as a car club membership card for the owner and the car. *Placas* are used to validate a car customization as legitimate expression of the club style or aesthetic standards.
- Car clubs influence the aesthetic outcome of car customizations at two levels: formally and informally. At the formal level, this aesthetic outcome is achieved by the implementation of standards and limitations, car models, and level of customization. Informally, the car clubs influence those outcomes by recommending painters, mechanics, upholsters, and by reinforcing relationships that favor particular interpretation of the Low n' Slow style.

- The more mature and older a car club, the more stable, refined, and clear its own style approach becomes, allowing it to be more rigorous with its members. However, they also have a more extended network that helps members to follow the club's aesthetic requirements.

### **About Lowrider Cars**

- One of the first things that were revealed during the interviews included the notion of flexibility of the definition of a lowrider car and a low-rider individual. The type of car owned or the level of customizations does not define a low/rider; rather, low/riders are defined by a system of cultural practices and values surrounding the community. A person can even be a low-rider without owning a lowrider car. However, the car plays an important role in defining and identifying the owner. Owner and car interact and affect each other.
- Lowriding is perceived as an intrinsic component of the member's identity. The car is a central element but not the definitive one; the owner's affiliation to the values of Low n' Slow is considered more important. Therefore, a car club can have no cars and still be considered as a part of the low/rider community.
- These definitions of lowriding membership have changed over time and vary in different regions. Furthermore, there are unresolved tensions in the lowrider community about how much customization is

allowed or how far a customization on a car can proceed before the car stops being a car or even a lowrider.

- There are two extremes in customizations and color transformations; one follows a puritanical approach that prefers traditional post-WWII American car models and the preservation of a car club's self-defined authentic look. Another faction believes that any car, from anywhere, and with any change can be transformed into a lowrider. Car clubs are distributed along a line between these two approaches, creating polarization and distinction.
- Lowrider cars are envisioned as complete unified projects, not as an amalgamation of parts. Therefore, color and all other customizations are visualized in relationship to each other and to the overall vehicle.
- The high specialization and commodification of lowrider customizations has deeply changed the dynamics among the car owner, the painter, and the car clubs, much as it has among the user, the maker, and the designer (Giard, 2005, p. 59) in the more traditional Euro-centric design model.
- For the most part, low-riders do not paint their own cars any more, as this task is delegated to the painters. This has created tensions and fractures in the community because, increasingly, monetary resources define the final design.
- In general, these painters have extended control over the process and the imagery used in the cars. Overall, however, the car owners

maintain a level of control over the car since they make decisions about who paints the car and how much they can afford to pay for the work. Both the car owners and the car painters maintain different tasks and roles in the process.

### **About the Painters and the Car Owners**

- For lowriders, the relationship between the painter and the car owner is very important, and one of shared control. Lowrider car owners tend not to have a blueprint of their final customized car, leaving most of the design decision-making to the painter.
- Car painters are positioned as special individuals within the lowrider community, and are the only ones capable of visually reading and translating the owner-car identity, connecting the abstract world to the material world.
- Nevertheless, the process of reading and envisioning a car is highly ambiguous and unclear. Keeping it obscure has amplified the painter's mystique. Car painters claim that reading a person includes not just discovering their identity, but also their relationship to the car, their gender, age, temperament, and social relationship to the Low n' Slow community.
- Experienced painters argue that car owners' creativity is influenced by the work of other painters and previously finished work. Generally speaking, car owners observe only what already exists. On the other



hand, painters believe that they are located in a particular place, with an advantageous relationship with the creative world because of their sensibilities, vision, and capabilities to create innovations — things that do not even yet exist.

- For painters, the need to continually innovate is important to ensure uniqueness, but it also serves as an informal mechanism to regulate other painters who may try to copy the work of others. They argue that if you copy someone else's work, you are not a true painter and therefore you are at the same level that a car owner. This is amplified for the supernatural status given to the painter as a gatekeeper of Low n' Slow aesthetics.
- The painters' social capital, as expressed in their community recognition and their mastering of the craftsmanship, translates into the power to demand and impose their point of view with respect to car customizations. The longer painters are in the field, the more control they have over their work. Novice painters are more willing to accommodate the owner's requests than well-known painters.
- Car-show trophies and prices, car club gatherings, and other client recommendations work as the painter's business card and means of publicity. For painters, maintaining their privileged visionary status is crucial in order to survive. They want to be recognized because of their distinctly innovative approaches, and not by their tendency to

repeat their work. Therefore, painters try to constantly explore new color combinations and techniques.

### **About Aesthetics and Color Use**

- The Low n' Slow style is understood as the aesthetic style that differentiates the lowrider community, their cars, and their car clubs. For low-riders, the perpetuation of this style is conceived as essential for their culture in order to fight homogeneity and to prevent forced enculturation.
- Through their *rasquache* aesthetics, low-riders turn the experience of being under surveillance into an intentional act of turning themselves into the center of attention. Rather than run and hide, low-riders create a visual spectacle where they are in control of the show, redefining notions of public and the private. Being the center of everyone's gaze is understood not an act of naïveté but rather an act of bravery and self-determination.
- Colors and graphics are not randomly chosen; on the contrary, they are highly monitored and policed by car clubs in order to ensure a message that is clear and consistent with the Low n' Slow traditions.
- For low-riders, color is understood as an expression of someone's personality, their community, car club, territory, or the type of car they have. In other words, color is perceived as an essential element

of car customization because of its expression of the uniqueness of identity.

- Therefore, color is not a fixed feature for low-riders because it changes and adapts. Low-riders believe that to each owner-car relationship there are 'appropriate' color combinations. Since car colors are relational, it is expected that chromatic combinations will change over time and place in order to adjust and represent new realities. As a result, color changes are understood as the consequences of intrinsic adjustments in the relationship between the lowrider owners, their environment, and their car. Therefore, constant chromatic modifications are expected along the process of car customization until the project is done, and it is expected to continue on.
- Low-riders use color in many instances to reflect the life of the barrio and the street life, as well as an instrument to keep the experiences and emotions of the owner alive.
- As shown in several of the lowrider paint schemes, color is part of the visual narrative of the car and is used to link low-riders to their past, transforming the cars into memory holders, as alternative mediums for storytelling and chronicles of and for the community.
- At present, red, including magenta and pink, is claimed to be the most popular color for lowriders, in clear opposition to mainstream American popular car colors, which are white and grey.

- Lowriders explicitly play with several social color transgressions in order to increase their shock effect. For example, the use of pink by males is understood not as sign of weakness but rather as a way to express their internal self, as an evidence of male endurance and sexual security. The use of pink is also interpreted as the way to have fun at the expense of others, and by creating confusion.
- For low-riders, particular colors are tied to notions of machismo and manhood, which emphasizes the role of men as protectors, providers, and holders of family strength.
- Color is used to emphasize heterosexual desires, especially because lowrider cars are defined as female entities, as objects for masculine pleasure. In some cases, they refer to their cars as the 'other' woman in their life, as an extramarital female lover.
- Since the car is a female entity, the customizations are expected and desirable, and can be seen as akin to the woman 'dressing up' for her man. Therefore, as a *caballero*, a low-rider cannot deny something to the one he loves.
- Similarly, lowriders are perceived as creative seducers who create visual illusions through their car customizations and the mastering of color. In this sense, creativity is perceived as a male attribute, as evidence of one who cares and protects his family and community from cultural invisibility and forced enculturation.

**CHAPTER V**  
**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS —**  
**“DRIVING BACK HOME”**

**PREFACE**

During this research, my main interest involved the exploration of the relationships between lowrider car customizations and their use of color, particularly as it pertained to the construction and perpetuation of Chicana/o cultural values. My primary focus concerned the discovery and comprehension of the process that guided the selection and manipulation of color as a design element and the values associated with color. As a researcher, I was also intrigued by the notion of the existence of a Chicana/o color palette, and the degree of connection between color and lowriders' sense of pride and nationalism. Finally, this project also intended to understand how the borderland experience and the marginalization of Chicana/os in the United States can provide a useful model and a theoretical framework for analyzing vernacular design productions and to explore the role of traditional design theory in relation to Chicana/o cultural productions. This section is a summary of all these inquiries. The present chapter works as a place to unify all the research done. It directly addresses design as the point of departure and of arrival for this dissertation.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Several questions guided this research. This section will provide interpretations and answers based on the findings. Moreover, the answers will lead to conclusions and implications for design, which remains at the center of this research. These answers will also help the reader summarize the information in a way that is more concise and clearer (see Figure 50).

1. What is the role-played by color in lowriders, in the perception and explanation of Chicana/o cultural background? How does social environment and/or history define the use and selection of color?
  - For low-riders, the typical mass-produced car in today's market is incapable of manifesting connections and identity to ethnicity, class, history, self-affirmation, auto-valorization, etc. On the contrary, mass-produced cars, as a one-size-fits-all concept, are perceived as cultural impositions and a form of colonial domination. Consequently, low-riders transform the car in order to create the conditions needed to reflect themselves and their realities.
  - Low-riders perceive color as the direct result of relationships created between the owner and the car. Depending on the type of connection (emotional, historical, spatial, sensual, etc.) the type of the car customization will vary. In these cases, the chromatic decisions for the car, as well as its form and functionality, are superseded by cultural and emotional values.

- Color is understood as intrinsically connected to cultural background and as an expression of individual and collective identity.
  - Color is used as a means to carry on a present narrative of the past. Color, when tied to the concept of a mythical past, is utilized as a unified element to build community, as a tool to preserve history, to narrate, and to educate other generations about cultural heritage. By way of the discourse about color and place, low-riders do not only claim ownership about their past but also about their future.
  - Color is utilized as a hybrid aesthetic element as expression of low-riders' mixed reality, with multiple points of visual engagement.
  - Color is used in lowriders as a way to represent change and transformation. Consequently, the idea of a fixed Chicana/o palette is contrary to their need for individuality and self-expression.
  - Low-riders use color to create safe spaces of differentiation, cultural performance, and cultural genesis.
2. How does the lowrider community negotiate color? How is color used as an element of resistance or transgression by low-riders? (see Figure 50).
- Color cannot be disassociated from the design and production of a lowrider customization. It is an essential component of the Chicana/o border visual language.
  - Low-riders use color to navigate and fight against imposed Eurocentric structures of aesthetic and taste power.

- Consequently, color works as a tool to fight cultural invisibility and hegemonic enculturation. Low-riders' chromatic interventions reinforce their self-validation as a group.
  - Color is purposely selected and arranged to create specific shocking visual effects for the viewer. Yet, rigorous standards are enforced to ensure clear messages of differentiation and transgression.
  - However, chromatic transgressions happen not just by rejecting the stereotyping of the Chicana/o lowrider community but also in some cases by amplifying some of those assumptions and de-centering power. In other words, low-riders may perpetuate assumptions of otherness by imposing a hyper-visibility. In such cases, a forced visibility by a marginalized community is an act of self-valorization.
3. How do car clubs influence car chromatic and aesthetic outcomes? How do car clubs intervene in the selection of car painters? Are there recognizable car club aesthetic differentiations? How do car clubs differentiate themselves from other car clubs aesthetically?
- As plural entities, car clubs are created around multiple elements of association. Therefore, they develop particular interpretations of the Low n' Slow style that unifies and differentiates the clubs.
  - The control and managing of visual/aesthetic elements, including color, is crucial for car clubs in order to ensure sameness as well as differentiation.



- Car transformations continue indefinitely as a collective enterprise by way of car shows and magazine exposure. In this case, a collective methodology of design and re-design of the cars is in place, one where the community and the club entrusts the owner to consistently accommodate new aesthetic requirements.
4. What design methodology do lowrider painters use when selecting their palette of colors and designs? What is the role of painters, car clubs, and owners in the use and selection of color for their lowrider cars?
- In the case of low-riders, the process of design, as a plan of action, is defined by interactions and relationships between multiple players that include the whole lowrider community.
  - The Low n' Slow movement has experienced deep changes in the dynamics of interaction between the car owner, the painter, and the car clubs, affected by the commodification of their practices. This has created tensions, fractures, and challenges in their community.
  - Low-riders reproduce old craft models, where the painter is presented as a lone genius, with high control over the creative process. As an open creative contract, the painter is free to change the car paint job as he proceeds.
  - The creative work of the painter is not undertaken in isolation, but is greatly affected by a network of interactions that involve the Low n' Slow community, as well as developments in the mainstream.



*Figure 50. The agency of color in lowriders is a complex matter; however, this diagram shows eight essential ways that color is used and functioned in lowrider cars.*

## GENERAL IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Answers to research questions provide insight to the phenomenon of color use by low-riders. However, how do these answers contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary industrial design? For example, what are some of the implications for design in general? What difference does this research make to the practice of contemporary industrial design? Or to the design community? Because the research topic was bound by social and cultural norms not typical to traditional industrial design, on one hand, and yet manifested itself by way of the most common of everyday object, the

automobile, it is necessary at this point to reflect on the overall object/context relationship.

- At the most basic level this research is important because it has created a space for the study of a community that has been traditionally disfranchised from design and art studies, at least outside the model of the exotic. Certainly, the study of low/riders and Chicana/os remains a new territory.
- From a design point of view, this research offers a diverse body of literature about core issues surrounding our understanding of color and how color can be utilized as a design element for purposes of differentiation, subjugation as well as to empower a community. Knowing how Chicana/os and low-riders approach color can, for example, provide the car industry and the design field with new tools to address their needs and preferences.
- This research has also explored that vernacular design, such as car customizations, can be perceived as actions that are political, subversive, and transgressive. In part, this research explored the conflict generated when mainstream design is refused or rejected by an organized cultural group. Low/riders have provided a useful example to understand what is at stake when a community perceives mainstream design proposals as inadequate in their search for identity and social values.

- This research also showed that lowriders became almost an excuse to explore the politics of design, along the discourses of taste and hegemonic aesthetics, proposed by modernity. It calls attention to the unfounded ground that design can be universal, international, or global for all. It gives value to the notion of difference as an essential democratic component for design, rather than homogeneity.
- Furthermore, this research explored how a community utilizes vernacular design as a tool to articulate self-governance of the material world around it. In this case, a mass-produced everyday object is transformed into something that questions its core definition. This research has explored what happens when a car stops being a car and becomes something else. Low/riders have allowed for the study of what may be called as divergent design, when an object becomes deviant, leaves the realm of the intended objective, and becomes something else.
- This research also brought together academic research areas that normally do not always come together, such as design studies, race and ethnic studies, Chicana/o studies, and queer studies. Within the area of industrial design, these academic research areas permit us to analyze everyday objects beyond mere usability, form, or aesthetic values and include agents of social tension, connectivity, and cultural practice.

- In this research, the multidisciplinary approach was useful from a design theory perspective because it brought to the table a new set of tools to understand the value of camp and kitsch, for example, and the existence of different visual and taste systems of reference.
- The concept of the border, *la frontera*, is also particularly useful for design theory as it explains a unique space where different groups clash and interact. The reality of the border as an ‘in between’ contingent place, where power disparity and tension generate a different point of view — one from the peripheries — is applicable to many other places around the globe. The concept of the borderlands can help designers understand the implications of communities on the move, or trapped between cultural, ethnic, and political spaces.
- The concept that hybrid ‘border’ objects can be visually bilingual, as they work multiple semiotic systems, unsettles fixed notions about everyday objects. For designers, it also opens the potential for these everyday objects to become new venues for innovation and creativity. If designers observe with more attention the work that happens in the periphery, they may be able to predict market trends and changes, as well as propose new solutions that better fit plural markets.
- Finally, this research puts into question certain aspects of contemporary design, theory, and education. As the demographic landscape of the United States changes, design field will most likely have to change in order to represent a body of knowledge and points

of views that are more diverse. The disparity in the presence of minorities' students and faculty of color in industrial design must be recognized as a way to decentralize the relevance given to Eurocentric taste and aesthetic norms.

## **FINAL CONCLUSIONS ABOUT COLOR USE IN LOWRIDERS**

In this research, several elements became apparent about color as it relates to issues of cultural identity and negotiation. I have divided them in three major categories, or what I called as the three pairs of Cs: a) Culture in Contact, b) Creativity in Contrast and, c) Color in Context.

The first category, culture in contact, refers to the notion that color is understood by low-riders as expressions of their unique cultural identity. However, this uniqueness is one that comes from the clash between two different cultural groups, the Anglo and the Latino. Therefore, color in cultural contact rejects the idea of chromatic puritanism and the notion that cultural groups are stable.

The use of colors by lowriders reflects a different approach, one that comes from the margins — where constant changes take place, where almost anything goes, and where there are no limits or specific color palettes. Low-riders propose the use of color from a hybrid point of view that is not stable but rather 'in between' or 'neither-nor.' In the border of this cultural clash, tolerance for contradictions becomes the norm. Therefore, the mixing of multiple colors, icons, periods of time, and textures can coexist in the same

car without conflict. Color is perceived as a visual representation of the cultural-self, but in this case, the self is split between the Anglo and Latino cultures. Color helps unify their narratives, by proposing a common past, by representing ties with a place, such the barrio, or by reflecting collective and individual life changes.

In contrast, creativity refers to understanding the creativity implicit in color, and its constant reevaluation of color use because it allows low-riders to create spaces for cultural enactment. The extreme chromatic choices and customizations often made by low-riders create spaces of hyper-contrast where differentiation is perpetuated and amplified. Contrast implies that the use of exaggerated color has to do as much about them as it does with a different cultural group in opposition. For example, in order for a pink lowrider to be subversive, low-riders need to manage mainstream understandings of what is defined as normative. In this case, the rejection of the notion of a Chicana/o palette while simultaneously avoiding mainstream car colors can be interpreted as creating, by default, a palette of colors that ultimately perpetuates 'otherness.' The difference here is that low-riders actively utilize their agency to define how they want to represent themselves. Their creative transgressions coax mainstream gaze from one of surveillance to one of admiration, exaltation, and discussion. Low-riders find pleasure in seducing the viewer with their creativity.

Color in context refers to lowriders' use of color as an element for resistance, transgression, and self-definition in the context of their socio-

political reality. From a design point of view, lowriders provide a valid example of the use of design to force a community and its objects out of invisibility. Low-riders, as design deviants, reject mainstream notions of cars as transportation devices, but also reveal crucial elements about the social roles of mundane and fantastic objects.

Lowriders can be understood as vernacular rejections of an imposed Eurocentric aesthetic. Lowriders emerge as examples of everyday refusal to chromatic forced enculturation. Therefore, elements such as cultural pride, sensuality, visual rebelliousness, fun, and cost may prevail over other elements such as pragmatism, social compliancy, and integration. In other words, color in context reflects not just different cultural realities but also very distinct economical possibilities and emotional needs from a cultural group at the margins. In the context of the border, color creates spaces for fun, recreation, and decompressing the effects of subjugation. The fantastic-real of the lowriders velvet interiors, bright colors, and hydraulics customizations contextualizes Chicana/o rights to control how to envision a different present in their own terms. In this case, lowriders exist as material expressions of complex epistemological systems.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH AND OTHER EXPLORATORY GROUNDS**

In the examination of low-riders, lowriders and the use of color, the research opens the door for further scholarship about the relationship between objects, cultural identity, and the roles of vernacular design as a



creative space for cultural negotiation. Several areas require more study and analysis for example:

- In terms of design methodology, three elements discussed in this research are particularly intriguing and require further analysis.  
A) The exploration of the issues of de-colonial methodologies, specially in regards to the applicability for design of alternative methods and tools to approach marginalized communities. B) The study of the concept of collective methodologies as communities engage in a plural process of creativity, as model for teamwork and interdisciplinary collaboration. C) The exploration of the contributions in new methods created by industrial design in the study of objects that can be useful for ethnic Studies analysis of the material world.
- The creation of gender categories in inanimate, mass-produced everyday objects as well as the use of color as a gendered element requires a deeper exploration in order to understand how the material world is utilized to perpetuate particular forms of gender performance. The assignation of gender in these everyday objects is artificial and socially constructed; therefore, its study can help designers to better understand how users relate, approach, and manipulate their everyday objects as well as how people's gender identities are reproduced and mirrored.

- Further research also needs to be done in the understanding the tension created between forced enculturation, commodification, and self-determination as unsettled categories that are not stable but in negotiation as they affect lowrider car customizations and the interpretation of authenticity and style.
- Another intriguing area of research is the analysis of the effects of low-riders on car customizations, the commodification of their practices, and the role of mass media, including *Lowrider Magazine*, in the transformation of lowriding outside the art craft model.
- During the interviews, several low-riders talked about their use of the Internet as a tool to create online communities, to sell cars, to promote lowriding activities, to learn new techniques and to be informed about new aesthetic trends. In many ways, the Internet is creating the possibility of virtual car clubs. From the design perspective, it will be important to understand the implications of this new technology in the creation of particular styles.
- Finally, it will be important to do research on non-Latino lowriders, especially in those countries outside the United States, such as Japan, Germany, and Australia. This kind of research should be undertaken in order to understand how these other lowrider communities perceive customizations, how do they define Chicana/o aesthetics, and how cultural practices are trans-located and reappointed by different cultural groups in order to create new identities.



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## APPENDIX A

### LOW N' SLOW HEALING:

### THE PRACTICES OF EMANCIPATION IN LOWRIDERS

**LOW N' SLOW HEALING:**  
**THE PRACTICES OF EMANCIPATION IN LOWRIDERS**

It is interesting that after so many years in the making, the image of low-riders still tends to be very negative, laden with stereotypes even when low-riders and academic researchers have dismissed many of the arguments concerning gang involvement and violence. Even real arguments about the treatment of women as objects have been manipulated to perpetuate an unchanging, primitive, and violent group, disregarding the potentiality and affirmative qualities of this community. The criticism has come from both sides, within and outside the Chicana/Latina community. I am not trying to avoid confronting the multiple challenges experienced by this community. I do not want to present an idealized, and nostalgic image of low-riders, as modern *caballeros* or misunderstood suffering heroes. Rather I wish to allow them to express in their own words how lowriding, car club associations, and the network system of camaraderie have helped them to understand and surmount their everyday challenges.

**A. Understanding oppression and forced enculturation in the  
Low n' Slow way.**

For low-riders, one of the most painful criticisms emanates from their own Chicana/o Latino community because they expect the community to understand the cultural and historical values associated lowrider practices of

car customization. In this regard, Johnny Lozoya, says, “many [brown people] don’t want to see it, the positive aspects of lowriding, because they want to be *gabachos* [anglos]... they have been conquered. They don’t have *huevos* [balls]” (personal communication, March 23, 2011). This is a harsh statement, but it need to be situated in the context of their understanding of experience of racial and oppression relationships. It is clear that for Lozoya, the understanding of the positive elements in lowriding requires a deep connection to one’s cultural roots, not just by defining yourself as Chicana/o Latina/o, but by side yourself with the issues and struggles of their community. Lozoya’s approach to forced enculturation, as interpreted in his expression, “they want to be *gabachos* [anglos]” is not only a criticism, but also a call of attention about the dangers of refusing to recognize where Latina/o Chicana/os come from. In this case, the strategies deployed against forced enculturation must be understood as part of low-rider’s refusal to alienate. The practices around lowriding allow their member to enact collective strategies of remembering and reinforcing their Chicana/o culture.

It is because the centrality given to the male and to heterosexual masculinity that the absence of cultural pride and cultural self-identity is paired to the absence of ‘huevos,’ in other words, a weak masculine character. Gender discussed here are used as tools to emphasize the value of avoiding alienation. For Lozoya, becoming a *gabacho* represents an insult to the cultural integrity of what is expected from an unified man. The problem is not about being *gabacho* per se, but rather about becoming a *gabacho*,

turning *white*, when you are a Chicana/o Latino, a brown person. The discourse here requires a deep understanding of the implications of forced enculturation for lowrider individuals, especially because of the rampant segregation, racialization, and oppression imposed on them by the police and the State. In this context, Lozoya's arguments about Latina/os Chicana/os that refuse to see the positive elements of lowriding reinforces his point of view with regards to the effects of internalizing oppression and invisibility. In this case, it is exemplified by a person of color that becomes the source of subjugation by turning their back on their community and tries to become 'white,' or pretend to be Anglo.

Low-riders are aware of their socio-economical oppressive reality. They understand the racial and political context that frames their car customizations. Certainly, as Ruben Reyes (personal communication, March 31, 2011), has explained, lowriders are not a "fantasy, for the contrary it is very real." Here, Reyes refers to the concept of fantasy as a condition in opposition to the real. He is not refusing the use of fantasy and imagination as parts of the car customizations or what a lowrider car becomes. In this case, the fantasy created by and around the car is not an escaping fantasy, one created in order to simply avoid or run away from their oppressive reality. Reyes point is that lowriders are grounded in their reality

Johnny Lozoya also expresses lowriders awareness of their oppressive condition. He contextualizes the political and cultural struggles

experienced by him and other Latina/o Chicana/os growing up in South Phoenix. He relates that experience with today's reality. He says,

For a long time we have been a conquered society. We have to break those chains. We cannot keep living under oppression. [Today,] We are hard with Tunisia, Libya, [and] Egypt... but what about South Phoenix? In the 60s as a child going into Elementary School, we were programmed by the school to fear the Russians. [They used to repeat,] 'The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming.' We did not worry about the Russians... because the Sheriff was going to kill us first. That was our reality, and today is the same way. The Maricopa Sheriff [Joe Arpaio] will attack us first... as well as the [our poor] access to education, and an education for failure... wherever it is, financial, medical...that will kill us first. There is something wrong with the system. (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

For Lozoya, the capabilities to comprehend clearly the ramifications of this community's oppression in a way connects his South Phoenix experience with the global context. It allows him to deconstruct subjugating narratives from more the half a century up to today. Lozoya's point of view is that this system, which is intrinsically wrong, works as a network with multiple outlets. The violence they experience in the barrio is manifested not only through the discourses of poverty, but also in those around access to education, security, health care, and constructive social policies. In addition, Lozoya calls the attention to the processes of 'programming' and mis-

educating the community, in a way that misleads what are the real sources of violence. Low-riders, aware of their reality, truly frame their cultural productions. Low-riders are not avoiding their reality; on the contrary, they are purposely embracing it. They do not 'mess around' because they know that it is not a game, as their lives and the lives of those they for whom they care are on the line. The system of oppression is killing them it is going after them and this is very real for them.

### **B. Low-riders Social Involvement.**

It is important to understand that low-riders do more than just build a collective consciousness about their reality. They try to improve their options in society by transforming the structures around them. They do not engage in a passive approach; on the contrary, through social engagement, they try to heal and correct the injustice that surrounds them. It is in this context, that Ruben Reyes, adds,

Lowriding was the first time [where] I found out about community involvement, because.... our car club used to have fundraiser events. In today's modern terms, [our car club was a] 501-c3 non-profit organization, [back] then it was just a bunch of guys that want to do something good for the community... I remember, if something happens, the car club used to organize a car wash, for a family in need, for scholarships. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

Reyes, as the first member of his family to attend college and is very proud to state “one of my first scholarships I got, was a lowrider scholarship from a lowrider club, back in 1984, to go to Arizona Western College. I got a scholarship from a car club to go to college. And now, look where I am” (personal communication, March 31, 2011). For Reyes, we need to understand that low-riders create a social network, one that provides support for their members and their families, especially for those who require more time and energy in order to survival because of their age and economical status (see Figure 51).



*Figure 51. Lowrider network helpto provide support and care for the future generations.*

As Lozoya explained, the reality and possibilities of success for Chicana/os are heavily defined by their limited access to resources within a system of oppression. In this case, low-riders work as an alternative system to the after-school programs that are disappearing. In addition, I argue that in the context of Arizona, where 42% of Chicana/o Latinos live in a single parent households, lowrider car clubs may fulfilled parallel functions of mutual aids associations. Reyes (personal communication, March 31, 2011), makes the point when he states that lowrider car clubs are “support systems, as a family.” Moreover, some car clubs have discontinued the term ‘car club’ and prefer to call themselves *families* because they have become more that a club; they are the members’ own ‘extended families’ (see Figure 52). For Reyes, been part of a car club puts “you in an advantage position over someone independent and alone” (personal communication, March 31, 2011), giving you and advantage over others.

Lowrider car clubs, through their systems of mentoring and socialization, may provide an informal network to educate young people about the trades of survival, like time management, organization skills, budget planning, social relationships, avoidance of drugs, and outlets for the creative use of limited resources. In such circumstances, lowrider practices, which reinforce or build social skills, represent part of the knowledge needed for emancipation in order to, as Lozoya argues, “break those chains” that have kept them as a “conquered society” (personal communication, March 23, 2011).





*Figure 52. Through their car clubs, low-riders work as extended families, which support and help heal the effects of social disintegration of the barrio.*

These arguments are corroborated by Ruben Reyes, as he reflects back about his experience as a young low-rider, in a poor farmer worker border community,

I did not know back then, what was happening... [In lowriding I learned] the importance to give back to your community, community involvement, the importance of learning about your finances, the importance of discipline, artistic expression, identity, the fact of organizing a meeting... all serious stuff, when you look at them. Those were things that we did not understand back then, completely, but they shape you. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

It is particularly interesting that Reyes explains to us that the process of developing these skills was something organic, and evolved as a natural

progression of their interaction within the group. They came as part of an informal system that shape and educate its members. This is very important because it frames how Chicana/os Latina/os responded to a the education system that, as Lozoya explained, its creating a track to failure. Confronted by the reality of poor access to education, the denial of their cultural background, and the imposition of stereotypes, lowrider car clubs present a model for informal education.

For example, a car club in Avondale, Arizona car club, motivated by a long time local low-rider Roy Guajardo, created an after-school program for at-risk Latina/o high school students. It involved the students in the creation of a community lowrider car (see Figure 53). The students, with the help of several car club members and with donations of local businesses, built a lowrider car, collectively. Together, the group decided all the elements of the car's customization. These types of projects are very popular and have been reproduced across the nation, even in conjunction with local police departments as outreach programs.

In another case, a car club in Santa Barbara, California worked with one of the art high schools in an after-school project, designing car murals and paintings. This project and the previous one are similar in the type of work and locality. In the latter project, the focus was on younger kids (seventh and eight graders) as they transition into high school. The goal was to increase school retention.



*Figure 53. Photo of a police lowrider car. This car was built as an outreach project between the city of Tolleson, AZ and several low-rider car club members.*

### **C. The Low n' Slow as an Alternative to Violence.**

Bugs, talking about his experience growing up in Mesa, Arizona, explains how discovering low-riders and getting involved in lowrider car painting saved his life from a path of self-destruction involving in drugs and violence. He encountered low-riders after almost being sent to juvenile prison. Nowadays, he says

Before you judge somebody, get to know them... [We, low-riders] turn the negative into positive, by paint[ing] a car... I do not drink. I do not do drugs. I do not smoke weed. Do you know, what it gets me high? My high is when I do a custom car. When I am done, I sit back, look at it, and say 'WOW, I did that!' That is my high... If God blesses me, I

want to die painting a car... 'Where is Bugs?' ... He is dead, with a paint gun in his hand. (Bugs, personal communication, March 11, 2011)

As Bugs explained during the interviews, painting not only provided him with a artistic outlet to express who he is, but also provided a space that is safe for his family, as well as an honorable income. Therefore, lowriding becomes a family affair.

I met my wife at a car show... Nowadays I am building a *lowcar* for my son and two bikes for my two grandsons...Why a bike? I am trying to get my son... into pinstriping, lettering, and all of that. One of the best ways to get into it is by start with a little project as a bike. (personal communication, March 11, 2011)

Bugs explains the relevance of continuing a tradition, and how it is that lowrider bikes work as a gateway to introduce others into car customization, especially those unable to own a car, or as a way to practice painting before engaging in a larger project (see Figure 54). For Bugs, one of the amazing characteristics of painting and customizing a car is that there are never two cars alike. As a painter, he is constantly challenged to move forward, to improve, and to resolve custom design problems. As he explains, this constant challenge forces him to create a particular character and strength, one that opposes the satisfaction of mediocrity. "When some one tells me, don't waste your time, that is not going to work. You know, I am going to find a way to make it work. I have to... It is like a challenge to me, and I'm going to make it work, prove them wrong" (personal communication, March 11,

2011). For him, lowriding has taught him how to be a resourceful individual, capable to work with few resources, in extreme conditions, and always finding a way to maximize the results.



*Figure 54. A lowrider bike, a small project, that can be used to initiate a Low n' Slow member into the process of customization.*

#### **D. When the money is tight.**

At a very pragmatic level, low-riders argue that the practice of lowriding has taught them how to achieve a better understanding of money and the need to be focused on your long-term life plan.

Lowriding at an early age taught me how to handle money. Because every kid in my neighborhood knew how much a good lowrider [car] cost around — between, the rims, the upholstery, the paint, the hydraulics... We all knew how much was involved. So [as a kids, you]

need to have discipline, you need to know what you want... you need to have a vision imagining the car. (R. Reyes, personal communication, March 31, 2011)

Reyes is clear: this element of imagining the final product, a car, and working towards it becomes the central discourse of lowrider design process. For another painter, Luis Miranda, this is manifested not just in his ability to follow one master plan for a car, but even managing multiple blue prints because, as he says, the final product may change as the project evolves. In this case, painter and car owner must develop a vision characterized by constant adaptation to the multiple changes that occur. For example, during the interviews, many lowrider painters explained how our economic recession has changed dramatically the rules of car customization.

Today, there are fewer people in positions that allow for the expenditure of large sums of money for a car paint job; therefore, lowrider painters have been forced to diversify their portfolio of projects and also to maximize the visual shock effects of their paint jobs. For example, just by reviewing my photo archives from 2001 to those of 2011, there is clear evidence of the drastic reduction in the amount of customized car murals, switching for more subtle paint jobs, characterized with pinstriping, solid color shades, and paint textures. Some painters have been forced to explore other avenues to support their income by way of T-shirt/hats airbrush painting, for example, as well as paintwork on boats and motorcycles. In any case, mastering the process of envisioning and flexible adaptability has

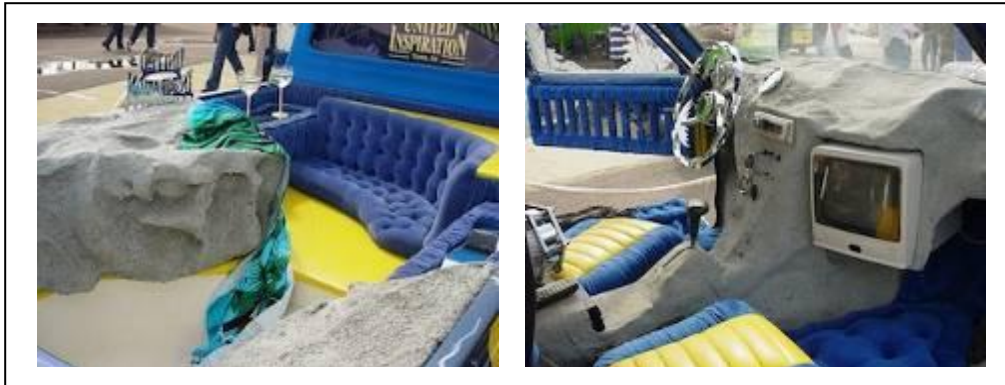
allowed low-riders and lowrider painters not only envision the cars, but also to imagine a different society.

#### **E. Healing through creativity and imagination.**

Another aspect of particular import that emerged during the interviews was that of creativity. For many low-riders, creativity was more than just creating innovative car customizations or seductive illusions with color, graphics, and upholsteries. Creativity was also about the ability to predict a result and to create something that was not there before. For Ruben Reyes (personal communication, March 31, 2011), one of the greatest skills he developed because of lowriding is the quality to imagine, and “envision the outcome... How are you going to get from plan A to plan B...” In this case, envisioning the process implies also the recognition that multiple steps are required in order to achieve the goal. By recognizing the final product and the path to achieve, it also requires learning, what Reyes called “the importance of discipline” and patience, as they move from one step to another, without ever knowing or having full control of what can happen.

This understanding about the power of imagination is hugely significant, especially in the context of a community where some of its members may live in such conditions of poverty. Nothing around them speaks of a different future outside oppression because this has been their experience for several generations. This is Ruben Reyes’s central point, when he says, “I always marvel...when you have a 16 year old, that has anything

going on for them. But, somehow are able to put together this script of a fine... dream” (personal communication, March 31, 2011). Here imagination serves a tool to heal the wounds created by oppression (see Figure 55). They rearrange history in their own terms in order to build new narrative about themselves and their community. They translate the imaginary into the material. To the great experience of discrimination and violence that low-riders endure, they are capable of proposing an ever-greater project, one of a customized future and based on their rights for equality and the pursuit of happiness.



*Figure 55. Photo of a creative lowrider extreme-customization, where the back of a truck has been transformed into a beach/resort paradise. If you cannot afford a beach vacation during summer, why not create you own beach, right here in Arizona!*

The lines of distinction between the practices of emancipation and those that perpetuate oppression are not always very clear. Sometimes they



are hidden and concealed. In the context of consistent social violence of the border, these practices of emancipation may not be very obvious to the untrained eye. Sometimes this is part of their nature of survival. Ruben Reyes says,

The colorful schemes are the ones they [mainstream] noticed, for obvious reasons. They are meant to be noticed. But, they don't notice the two-toned shades of black that are very subtle. But, true lowrider aficionados, they will get closer, see the two-toned color stripes, and say WOW!!... It is, by its very nature, the Low n' Slow. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

Similarly, lowriders navigate a subtle line where their practices of healing and liberation are concealed. In order to read them, it requires a trained eye, and open heart that allows the translation of those hidden meanings.

Lowriders are more than customized cars. They are a means to drive a thin color line. As Johnny Lozoya says in lowriding you better "lead, follow, or get out of the way" ... because they will keep cruising with you or without you!

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

	Owner	Painter	Consumer
<b>Representation</b>	- What is a lowrider?		
	- How do you identify or differentiate a lowrider from any other custom car?		
	- How important is color for a lowrider car?		
	- How important is/was color in the <b>definition</b> of your lowrider car?	- How important is color in the <b>definition</b> of your car design/graphic?	- How important is color in the <b>definition</b> of your car as a lowrider?
	- What do you think the color of your car <b>says</b> about the car, your car club or you?	- What do you think the color of a car says about the car, its car club or the owner?	- What do you think the color of a car says about the car, its car club or the owner?
	- How your car's color is <b>related</b> to your community?	- How you think the color of a car relates to the community of the owner?	- How the color of a car relates to the rest of the community?
	- Do you think that lowriders use color similarly to the rest of Chicano/Latinos community? Why?		
<b>Production</b>	- What make your car special for you?	- What make a car special for you?	- What make a car special for you?
	- Where did the "inspiration" for your car motive and colors come from?	- Where did the "inspiration" for your car motives and colors come from?	- Where you think the "inspiration" for car motive and colors come from?
	Can people borrow images from other cars		
	- How the colors for your car were selected?	- How do you select the colors you use in your car paints and/or designs?	- How do colors are selected for the cars?
	What differentiate your car from others?	- What differentiate you from other artists?	- What elements should a lowrider creates or emphasized to differentiate his/her car from others?
<b>Consumption</b>	- Do the technique used to paint a car affect the selection of colors? Why?		
	- What do you feel is more desirable: Painting your own car or have a painter doing it? And why?		
	What are the aesthetic elements that make a good lowrider car?		
	Do different car clubs have different color patterns?		
	Do you think that Lowriders from Arizona use different colors that, lowriders from other states... like California?		
	What you think that there is any relationship between the use of colors and the experience of Latinos/Chicanos in the US?		
	Do you think that the use color can be political?		



APPENDIX C

INTERVIEWEES DEMOGRAPHICS

Interview Type	Interviewees	# of Interviews	Lowrider Affiliation	Car Club	Lowriding Involvement (Years)	Place of Interview
Collective (4)	'Denny D,' Effrain 'Bugs' G Vincent Gutierrez [Anonymous]	1	Painter Painter Car Owner Car Owner	Gruppe CC	10+	Mesa, AZ (Restaurant)
Individual	Luis Miranda	3	Painter Entrepreneur (Magazine + Auto Shop)	Miranda's Customs	20+	South Phoenix, AZ (Auto shop)
Individual	'Sage'	2	Painter	[Independent]	10+	South Phoenix, AZ (Auto Shop)
Individual	Jesse Duarte	1	Car Owner	Society CC	15+	Chandler, AZ (Home)
Collective (4)	Raul Garcia [Raul Garcia's son] [Anonymous] [Anonymous]	2	Painter	Old School CC (Vice-President)	10+	South Phoenix, AZ (Auto shop)
Individual	Johnny Lozoya	4	Car Owner Event Organizer Activist Photographer	Phoenix Superevents	30+	North Phoenix, AZ (Coffee Shop)
Individual	Richard Ochoa	3	Car Owner Event Organizer Entrepreneur	Society CC	30+	Gilbert/Mesa, AZ (Coffee shop/Restaurant)
Individual	'Al'	1	Car Owner Car Club President	Identity CC	15+	Good Year, AZ (Home)
Individual	Nelson	1	Car Club	Identity CC	10+	Good Year, AZ (Home)
Individual	'Chavo'	1	Painter	[Independent]	10+	West Phoenix, AZ (Auto Shop)
Individual	Effrain 'Bugs' Gonzalez	3	Painter	Bug's Auto Art		Mesa AZ (Restaurant)
Collective (2)	Pear Hernandez [Anonymous]	1	Car Owner	Old School CC	10+	North Phoenix, AZ (Restaurant)
	Ruben Reyes	2	Car Owner	[Independent]	20+	Phoenix, AZ (Coffee Shop)

APPENDIX C  
HUMAN SUBJECTS

This research was granted Exempt Status from the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, after it was determinate to be in accordance with Federal Regulations 45CFR46.

			
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<b>Office of Research Integrity and Assurance</b>			
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<b>To:</b>	Prasad Boradkar AED		
<b>From:</b>	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB		
<b>Date:</b>	10/05/2009		
<b>Committee Action:</b>	<b>Exemption Granted</b>		
<b>IRB Action Date:</b>	10/05/2009		
<b>IRB Protocol #:</b>	0812003568		
<b>Study Title:</b>	Lowriders Car Customizations: Driving the Color Line		
<p>The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .</p> <p>This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.</p> <p>You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.</p>			